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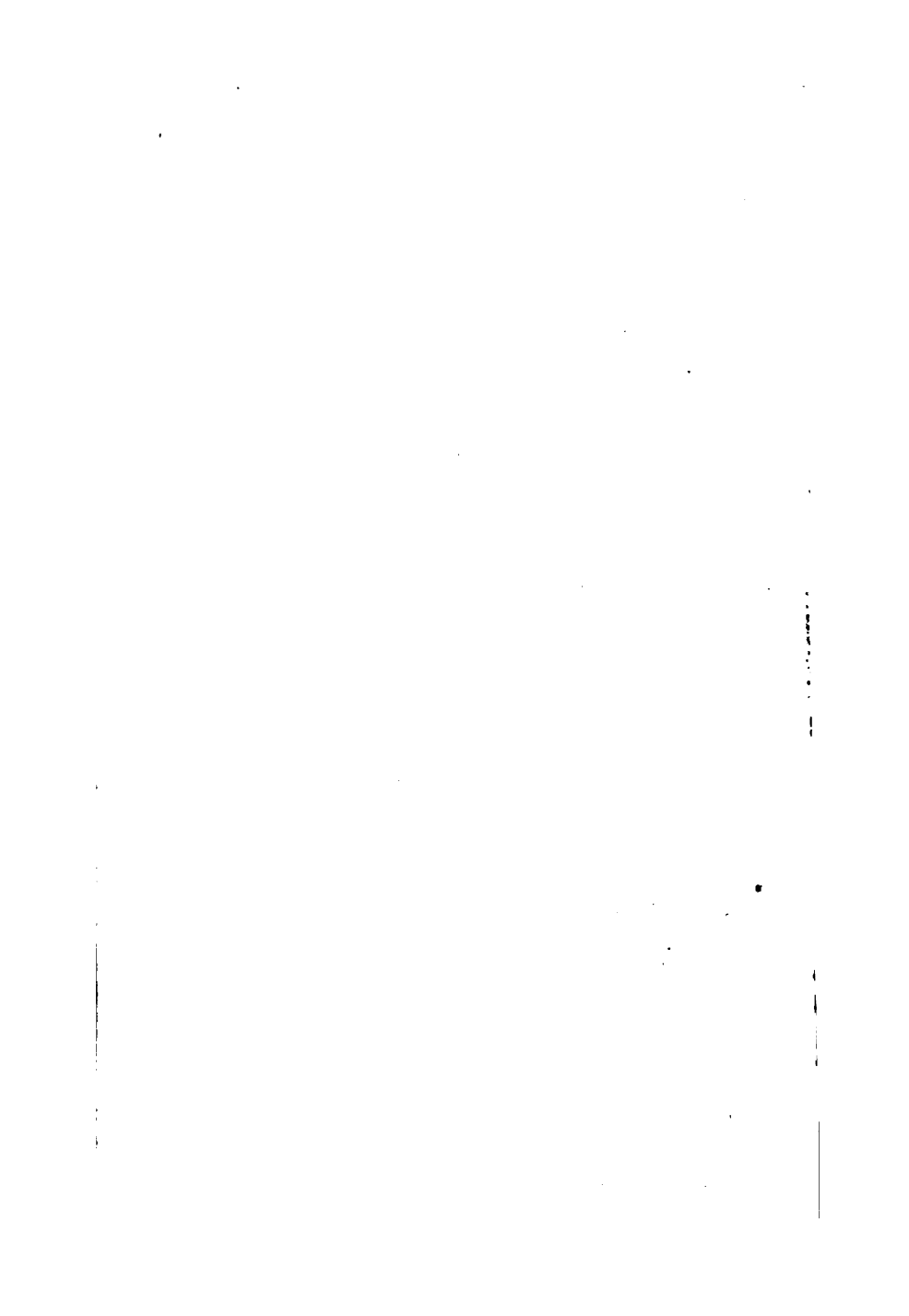
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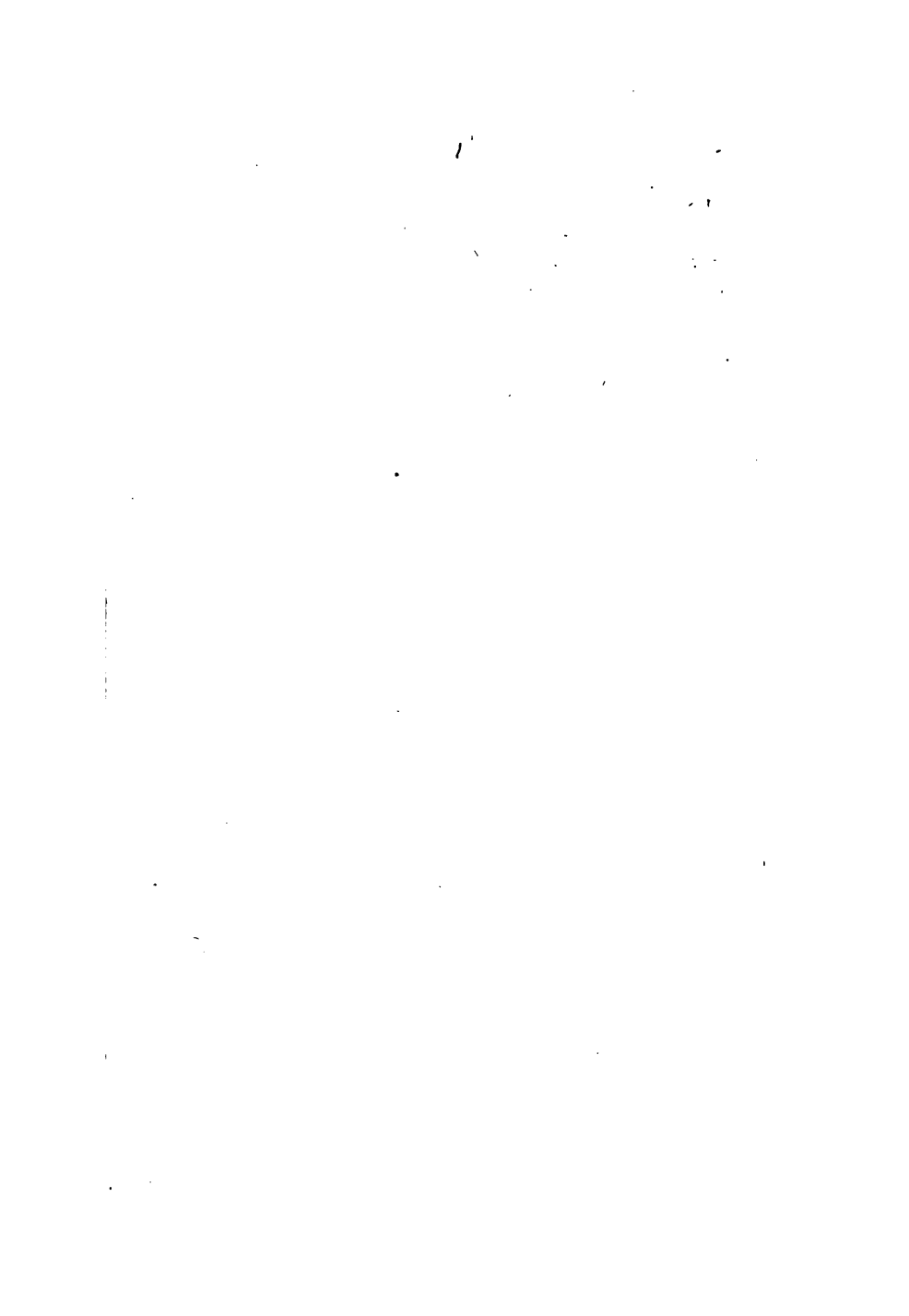


EVA M. RAYNER.

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# **BROKEN TOYS.**



# BROKEN TOYS.

A Novel.

BY

ANNA C. STEELE,

AUTHOR OF

"GARDENHURST," "CONDONED,"

ETC. ETC.

*NEW EDITION.*

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# BROKEN TOYS.

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## CHAPTER I.

PERNEL VERE.

**V**ERE COURT stood in a garden—a vagrant garden, of which the blossoms and seeds were ever straying into the park land. It was not a garden of trim walks and exact grass-plots, but a wilderness of vegetation, where roses seemed to grow hap-hazard on nettle-stalks, and the long grasses were haunted by the scent of the blossoms they had stifled. If you parted the weed-tufts, you powdered your prying fingers with auricula dust; if you trod the long rank turf, bruised violets yielded up their secret.

The house had been built of red brick; now it was what colour the seasons willed, for it was smothered with foliage.

I introduce it to you in autumn; so there are red and russet fringes round the glittering windows. Framing one especial casement, that of a corridor in Vere Court, a scarlet creeper throws a fluttering shadow on the inside wall and on a grey stone slab, which is supposed to be consecrated to a bust of the Medicean Venus, but which, from its breadth and convenient position as a window-sill, has been appropriated by Nella Vere as her playground.

On it she harangued her dolls, spread her scant number of toys, and ate stolen luxuries. Outside were the tree

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tops and the clouds. These corroborated all the wild fairy-tales in which she delighted.

There was no one to teach or to control her but her old nurse—no one to molest her but a staid elder sister. She had two brothers, who did not much dislike her; indeed, one of them was fond of her when she was useful to him. She had a father who loved her theoretically, but who did not care to spend the day in a corridor, and who had a nervous objection to children or animals entering his sitting-room before they were, as he expressed it, "well broken." Still, to Nella's mind, he was a very nice bunch of keys—that was her first distinct idea of her father. He rattled and shone when she bade him good-night, and blessed her with a kindly voice and inattentive eye. When Miss Nella was enjoined to pray for her parent, she added special collects of her own. The mind of five could not follow the solemn thoughts so imperfectly expressed by the nurse's formula of words. "Please make papa understand what I want next time I kiss him and look at the dish of oranges, keep nurse free of pins, and make Florella's eyes come right," was sometimes the child's *sotto voce* emendation of her set petition. Are older children less presumptuous when they entreat that heaven's laws shall be variable, to yield them happiness or to cease their agony?

When Nella was ten (her state name was Pernel, but this was only used when she was naughty or at catechism time) she emancipated herself, asserted openly her preference for untidiness, idleness, and jam without bread. She answered Nurse Martha's logic by those resolute expressions of will, "shan't" and "won't." That no one would ever love her, that the crow-boys would "scare" her, under a natural misapprehension, that she would come to a bad end, and would never go to heaven, and that these catastrophes would result from her tree-climbing, her objection to having her nose rubbed upwards to the odour of yellow soap, her predatory instincts, and her propensity to catch cold and sniff—at all these prophecies Nella scowled, and muttered her usual unanswerable defiance of "Don't care." "For Florella, my dear," she said, cuddling her blinking-eyed doll, "you will love me

till I die, and I you until you melt or get rubbed away; and if nurse is good, and means to go to heaven, we'll keep down here, and have the nursery to ourselves."

She loved Florella with thoroughly feminine and unreasonable partiality. Rosetta, the black-eyed doll, with intense cheeks and swarthy ringlets, was the prettier; but there was a sentiment about Florella, a watery pathos in her mild blue eye (she had but one; what should have been the other was a gap), an appeal in the infirm arm, ever stuck skywards, owing to an early derangement of the joints, and her hair was still beautiful, blonde, and frizzy, although she was constrained to wear a straw hat, as much caressing had made the scalp prone to assume erratic positions.

To-day Florella is temporarily discarded, and sits, or rather slides, stiffly against the wall. Her owner is deep in fairy lore; the long sunbeams that stream down the passage are those which penetrated into the princess's cob-webbed bower, and ripened the blossoms of the silent garden.

"She was lazy, that princess," argued Nella. "All the others were up and about when they were sent to sleep, but she was lying down on a couch. Perhaps she was a good girl, and went to bed early. Florella, let me introduce you to the princess. Good girls should know each other. Your Royal Highness, she has lovely hair, but it's a little shabby; will you excuse her removing her hat? Pray don't notice Rosetta; she is a rebel. I try all I can, with slapping and washing, to keep her in order; but she has a bad heart. She'll never go where good dolls go—that's my belief. Florella, don't you see (there, I've turned your eyeside to her) that the princess wants to talk secrets to the prince. Consider how long it is since she spoke. Of course she has a good deal to say. As his royal highness isn't a dog, he can't have his hind-leg talked off. Martha says something like that when she's cross, and I'm in good spirits, and inclined to chatter. Rosetta, if you grin at me like that, you shall have no milk in your tea. To-night we have the new acorn set. There will be company; so we must say 'grace,' and put on clean pinafores. Gracious, Rosetta, what a way to hold a cup



Who'll ever marry you if you stick your thumb into your tea?"

So Nella entertained invisible guests on her hospitable slab upstairs, babbling her happy fancies to the sunset, and listening to the west wind, which whispered to the creeper of how wild it had been. The creeper nodded solemn disapprobation, as Martha did when her nephew Jack "went wrong" and ran away to sea. Then the wind's sound deepened into a roar; the air was fresh with storm-splashes; the sea washed the moon's face; but, strange to say, did not put her out.

The wind changed into a church-bell. "He will never come back," it said; and then it spoke again, saying that Jack's mother was gone to look for him. "I wonder if she'll find him," Nella thought. "Generally if I lose anything and look for it until I'm sick and tired, I don't care for it if it turns up a long time afterwards. My darling Florella, when you have fallen down and broken your nose, as in the course of doll-nature you must, I will wear a black dress for you; but I won't go on saying, 'I told you so, I told you so,' as Martha and the boughs outside there do. Now it's time to go to papa. Rosetta, you must be put to bed here, and pray to be better."

So Rosetta was tucked up with a vicious poke at her miniature bed-clothes, and Miss Vere, hugging the favoured puppet, descended to the library.

Gilbert Vere sat by the fire with a glance as speculative as his daughter's had been; but it was a hard look. Those vague tender eyes, which youth wears in its day-dreams, are rarely seen in a world-worn face. This look sometimes comes back, when near death, the man, once again a child, cries, "what?" and "where?"

A small clean-cut head; hair grey, but waving and fine in texture; keen blue eyes, shrewd yet amiable, fiery yet weak in expression; features cameo-like in clearness and delicacy; a grey moustache, curling about an indecisive mouth; an irritable temper, masked by suave manner; an aristocrat always in appearance, sometimes in feeling; tall and graceful in figure, with delicate hands and feet—he was a father with whom any daughter might have been proud to ride in Hyde Park. As we

know, Nella at present only regarded him as a tall, thin object, with an infinitely attractive watch-chain, which was slung across him, and which got strangely involved in the nightly blessing Martha taught her to invoke on Gilbert Vere's head.

Looking at him now as he sits in slippers and dressing-gown before the fire, with cigarette fumes perforating his moustache, you would describe him as a gentleman, tempered by the *roué*. He had dined long since, and for his solitary meal he had assumed an evening suit; but the dress coat and boots were discarded while he enjoyed his glass of brandy and soda-water and his nightly cigarette, for, as he said, there was no use in his being a widower unless he took advantage of the luxury of the position. He had ever been a man of expensive tastes and limited income, chiefly interested in the problem of how to get through life with as little inconvenience to himself as possible. He had reduced selfishness to a science; like the birds which thieved his gooseberries, long practice had made him expert in dodging what thorns, and appropriating such fruit, as came in his somewhat barren ways. When Sarah, his wife, was living, she had repressed his propensity to incur debt. She talked much of dishonour and of ready-money payments. He heard without understanding her. It was as though a missionary essayed to instruct a cannibal in the value of his wife's soul when the savage was intent on appeasing his internal qualms of hunger with her material charms. But "anything for a quiet life," Gilbert Vere said, and submitted to be moral to save himself trouble.

Mrs. Vere died when Nella was six years old. Gilbert always spoke of her with a voice modulated to tenderness, and with veritable respect. It is doubtful whether we ever quite forgive the friend who has made us virtuous against our will; but Gilbert tried to feel his wife's loss deeply, and even sometimes persuaded himself that his grief had the longing of recall in it. He had two boys and two girls. Gilbert Vere, junior, aged twelve, and Max a year younger, were perpetual thorns in their father's flesh. These little marionettes seemed to him to be in a conspiracy to push the elder puppet off the board. The pupp-

was getting stiff-jointed, averse to moving quickly, and had a nervous horror of those young newly-made legs, which kept dancing over his toes.

He was fond of his lads, too, after his fashion; but he liked them best when they were at school, and his easy-chair, his muffins, and all his other pet selfishnesses, were secure from their encroachments. He liked Dora; she was quiet, tender, and thoughtful; she cut and aired his paper, and knew what he liked for dinner. Nella he did not trouble himself about; that was Dora's and Martha's duty. She looked healthy, and apparently knew how to read; for she was constantly displacing his books. He did not look round to-night as she stole to his side, but, inclining his face mechanically, saluted the wooden cheek of Florella. His eyes were full of thought, his hand held a pencil, and paper scored with figures.

"I stand to win ten thousand," he muttered, "and to lose—well, to lose all. But what is my all?"

His eyes fell on Nella.

"Nella," he said, "would you like to be rich?"

"I don't know what you mean," droned the child.

"Pshaw! Would you like to have pretty clothes, and new toys, and well-dressed little girls to play with?"

Nella looked doubtful.

"I knew a well-dressed little girl once. She was 'well-brought up,' nurse said. I don't like well-brought-up little girls. I pushed this one in a ditch, and spoilt her clothes. I like dirty little boys better. There's the crow-boy, Dick, who lives in the fields outside the park. He can climb trees, and blow me speckled egg-chains. He helped me to look down a hollow tree one spring. It was alive with dear little red wicked faces and shining black eyes. He called them a litter of fox-cubs. That's better fun than playing with Sunday-looking girls. What is being rich, papa?"

"To be rich is to be respected; to be rich is to be religious; it is to have men disinclined to believe ill of you; to be asked to dinner when you have abundance at home; to receive costly gifts which you don't require; to be listened to by men and loved by women: to live without feeling the bruise of life's pinches, and to die with a

happy conviction that heaven cannot fail to be lenient to one who stood so well with the world."

"Are we rich, papa?" asked the child simply.

"See how wealthy she is with life's best possession—youth. She has not found out what the word poverty means," he said, looking dreamily into the little betting book he held, full of lucrative and ruinous possibilities. "There can be small harm in robbing her now; she would never find out the loss. Later on, I'm sure to get a stroke of luck. Then I will dower her royally."

"What is being poor?" persisted the child.

"Read history," Mr. Vere said absently. "Chatterton knew. He felt the stroke of the wind pierce his old coat, and the crave of the wild beast in his throat; he had a bright light in his soul—they call it genius—but it couldn't warm his fireless attic. Crabbe knew. He gnawed crusts like a hungry rat, and had to play the beggar with his hands. There was Haydon, the painter, who kept note of his soul's despair up to the date of its climax:—'On such a day I sickened with poverty; on the morrow my trouble grew; on the next, failure made me mad; on the last—may God forgive me!' And so they found him with a red line across his throat, his blank eyes turned towards his unfinished picture. A tender message for his wife; his death perhaps might bring her a pension; and he bartered existence for that hope, so great was his need of wealth."

"I often think I should like to be something different; but I don't think it's to be rich," said the child simply. "I think I want to be a bird. There are no maps in their world such as Dora makes me copy. Then I could fly over the garden wall and steal bites out of the cherries the old gardener is so stingy over. Dick and I have broken our nails and taken all the skin off our knees trying to climb the wall."

"If you were rich you could have cherry-orchards of your own."

"I don't suppose I should care so much for 'em then," Nella said, doubtfully; "there'd be nothing to climb for."

Her father laughed. "The true Eve-strain," he said. "But, Nella, I don't think I approve of your having "

crow-boy for your companion. Remember you are a young lady, and he can never be a gentleman."

"Because he has dirty hands?" queried the child.

"For a hundred reasons," Mr. Vere said impatiently. "He is a clown by birth and position."

"We are all equal in the sight of heaven," Nella said, puzzled. "I know that's true, for the clergyman says so."

"Very likely; but we are not all equal in the eyes of society," snapped her father; "and I must insist on your not encouraging this beggar's brat. Now, go to bed, my dear."

Miss Vere hunched her shoulders, looked obstinate, and left the room. Her father resumed his calculations. He was "making a book." If he did well, he should win largely on the next Spring Meeting; if he were unfortunate, he should lose the larger part of Nella's fortune. He did not dare touch that of his sons, who might shortly require an outlay for their own advancement. Dora was marriageable, and had a propensity for curates. Nella was a child: for six years, at the least, he might depend on not being called to give an account of her legacy left in trust with him by the late Mrs. Vere's marriage settlement. It will be seen that his wife's death had left Gilbert Vere free to resume his favourite amusement of playing at fire in other people's premises.

"May I pray for Dick, nurse?" Nella queried, as she prepared to kneel down in her nightly devotion.

"Certainly not," Martha said, in high disdain. "Pray for a common, dirty little boy like that! Pray for your pa, Miss Nella, who's got such nice clothes, and looks the gentleman, every inch of him."

Nella was distressed. It seemed clear that Dick was equally ineligible for spiritual and worldly benevolence.

"I shall take him some sweets to-morrow, all the same," she murmured defiantly. "If he is fond of dirty hands, he didn't mind cleaning them by jumping into the pond after me that day I tried to find out how water-lilies grew, and lost my footing."

"Dick was born to a state of high-lows; you to a state of patent shoes. Don't try and go against nature, Miss," Martha said sententiously.

And Dick being declared contraband, Nella remained constant to him for a twelvemonth. She called it an eternity; it pleased her pride to defy authority and her palate to eat the ripest plum off the trees Dick scaled on her behalf. Thus Dick's attractions survived those of Florella, who was hanged one holiday time, or of Rosetta, who came to be buried in a snowdrift, an humble imitation of Suwarrow's victims.





## CHAPTER II.

### A GENTLEMAN'S SON, BUT NOT HIS HEIR.

**T**HE railing which divided the park at Vere from the fields, was a miracle of picturesque decay—nature had burthened it with her profligate beauty. The staid moss, full of rain-kisses; the clampering, eager ivy, and luscious masses of languid honeysuckle, had weighed it aslant. The deer had done their best to aid nature's work of destruction; for the out-standing fields of grain were more lovely in their sight than the close-cropped home pastures, and they could not hear the farmer's wrathful oaths, nor the consequent promises for their destruction uttered by Squire Vere.

It was a deep-breathed August noon, and two small faces were looking at each other earnestly through a break in the fence-work. A mass of chestnut-coloured hair hung about Nella's shoulders in tangled confusion; her mouth was smeared with greengage juice; her skirts were tattered; and suspicious scratches about her legs seemed to indicate that Miss Vere had forgotten her sex and station in the effort to pay a friendly visit to the lofty home of a jackdaw of her acquaintance. "I'm coming through," she was announcing to her friend in the field. "I'm coming to sit in the hedgerow, and then, Dick, you can howl between mouthfuls."

Dick was clad in brown, and looked as if he had been made out of the earth, as children pinch mannikins out of dough. He was a little brown speck, whose head only



just o'ertopped the forest of wheat, and who assimilated so well with his surroundings, that unwary rooks sometimes hopped over his leggings as he lay in the sun. He was not asleep now, for one of his few friends was before him, greengages in her battered demoralised hat, and concealed treasures of jam tartlets squashed in her pocket.

"They're rather crumpled," she said, with the air of a critic; "but they are sound where the jam is thick. Eat 'em, Dick. What a row there'll be when old Martha finds the dish bare!"

Unmoved by this contingency, Dick required no second bidding, but ate as only the young can eat, with that intensity of enjoyment which belongs to an unjaded palate and blameless digestive organs.

The young lady watched him contentedly. "I had had enough before I gave them to you," she remarked. Dick had betrayed no anxiety on this point, but she added this echo of self-content to the satisfaction of the moment, as a painter puts the crowning touch of colour which is to deepen the harmony of his subject.

Dick was about three years older than his companion; his face was sun-burnt and wind-bitten; he had rather large stolid-looking grey eyes, red lips, and flaxen hair, which curled close to his head—it looked like spun silk, and was amber-coloured in the sun. His mother had died when he was an infant. His father was not known, and had never given Dick anything, not even a surname by which he might be distinguished from other little boys.

Some scandal had once been talked about one of the Rev. Mr. Smyth's pupils, young Sir George Erle, who had left his tutor's under a cloud, but who had quickly insured his character by marrying well and going into Parliament. The rumour which linked the names of Nancy Morris and young Erle was energetically repressed by his clerical mentor, until nothing was left of it but a wink among the men, and a lowering of tones among the women of the village when Nancy Morris was seen lifting her head to watch the London road when it should have been spying out the tracks of the wheat-sheaves. Dick himself was not inquisitive on the subject. The pinch and ache of the present is sufficient for the poor. What has been is senti-

mental, and sentiment is an extravagance of luxurious life. The farmer who hired the lad to be a vocal terror to crows, christened him after a terrier pup, "Dick." At the same time he gave the biped three-and-sixpence a week, which sum was confiscated by the woman with whom Dick boarded and lodged.

It was a small house, crammed with gaping mouths, like an overful bird's-nest,—an ugly home it would have seemed to a lad trained in luxury; but to Dick it was a refuge, a hole in which to escape the bite of the cold, a shadow between his head and that fierce brand of the sun which sometimes smites the foreheads of the harvesters until they sicken and fall, wailing that their scalps are being stitched by hot bread. At eventide, when the great bells at gentlefolks' houses were sounding warnings of smoking joints and rare wine, when the poor man's day was ending in fatigue, and the rich man's day was in its prime of rest, when the crows Dick had scared cawed sleepily high up in their wind-swayed beds, then Dick and seven others sat down round a pail of spring-water, dipping in the crusts, which were all their supper. Still, Dick was content with his life until he met with Miss Vere and a jam tart; after that he was haunted by recollections and aspirations which made the sopped bread seem more than usually watery.

The acquaintance had originated in a dispute over a young rook, which Dick wished to eat, and which Nella wished to restore to the bosom of its cawing family.

"Put it down," she had said, in a tone of dignity.

"Noa, I shawn't."

"I am Miss Vere" (with great stateliness), "I live at the great house. We're the oldest family in the county."

Dick, unabashed, retorted, "Old things are good for naught; they're all crank" (shaky).

"I shall thrash you," Nella said, with kindling eyes and a sympathetic contraction of her fists. Miss Vere had brothers, and necessity had taught her the art of self-defence.

"Noa, you cawn't," with a provoking grin.

"What can you want it for?"

"I want it to put in ter poie," and his eyes gleamed

evil omens towards the unconscious big-nosed "flapper" in his hand.

Nella took scientific note of his wiry-looking frame (trees are excellent instructors of gymnastics), and tried persuasion.

"I'll give you a penny for it, and a jam tart."

Dick scratched his head.

"And a penny more if you'll put it back in its nest—it's too high for me. And here's another tart—it's only had one bite taken out of it."

Dick mused. "Tuppence," he said, "and all to spend on myself!" Without more ado, he scaled the elm indicated by Nella's out-pointed finger.

"I must trust to your honour not to take it when I'm gone," she said, when he descended, even redder than before about the face and hands, leaves and chips of bark sticking to his curls.

He stared at her blankly; the word was in itself a wonder.

"Where's the pennies?" he said suspiciously.

Nella drew herself up in what was meant to be a haughty attitude, and answered with majesty—

"A Vere never broke his—I mean her word. Here are the pence and the tarts; now promise me you won't take that bird when my back is turned."

The boy shook his head. "It's a mortal high tree to climb," he said, "and I've got the tuppence. In course, I shan't take *that* bird; there's plenty lives lower down." With which Nella tried to feel satisfied.

Hitherto Nella had possessed but three toys—Florella, whose pallor was fast becoming ghastliness under the influence of sun and soap; Rosetta, the snubbed one; and another doll, a pariah amongst puppets, whose hair had varied its fashion so often, that at last but one strip of tow, combed upwards *à la* Choctaw Indian, adorned its pate, and in this condition she had been scalped by Gilbert Vere.

She had once owned other attractions—real eyes, which opened widely or languidly, to order; but an internal derangement of wires condemned one eye to perpetual vigilance, whilst the other remained as persistently som-

niferous. After that "I flung her away," Nella said, when recalling her trials; "for when a doll once goes wrong inside, it's no use pulling the wires. I couldn't take her to bed with me, for it bothered me so—the thought of her never going to sleep with that eye; so I gave her to Gilbert, and he cut her open. She was base to the last, for she wasn't even bran. She was paper to the back seam."

Nella's other treasure was a battered copy of the "Arabian Nights," which smelt strongly of pepper, owing to its having been to school with Gilbert and there dwelt in an impromptu larder, in contact with other contraband luxuries. Time and use had impaired the pages, and the thousand and one nights were abridged to the number of a hundred when fate sent Nella a new diversion, in the shape of the crow-boy. At first he seemed hopelessly obtuse, and inclined to ingratitude, resisting her efforts at his mental improvement unless they were sweetened by jam; but he was an improvement on the dissected doll—he grinned when she brought him dainties, and looked sympathetic when she spoke sadly of an unprofitable raid on an empty larder. He was a live puppet. Something which she could patronise and teach; and most children, more especially girls, take pleasure in grafting their own knowledge in the brains of their fellow-saplings.

By degrees she partially civilised this young Orson. She taught him to read words of two and three syllables; she induced him to speak in a less provincial accent; she made clear to him the rudimental laws of cricket, hockey, and football; she even instructed him in boxing, at least in one or two scientific attitudes—attitudes which, she confidently assured him, would make him equal to any "man" (!) twice his height; but, as she also stuck very firmly to the thesis that no boy must hit a girl, because that was cowardly (Gilbert never does it, except he's in a great rage; and then he don't hit, he only slaps with the edge of his hand), it is to be doubted whether Dick gained much practice in the art of hitting out straight from the shoulder.

To-day they sat by the hedgerow, and talked a little of story-books, and a great deal of birds and animals; and

then came pauses, during which Dick thought of tigers, and how he should like to see a real one; and Nella mused on the young prince who would one day make her his princess—a halcyon future, when tarts should be numerous as pebbles, and Dick should perpetually wear his Sunday clothes. It is observable that the prince in question was some one quite distinct from Dick. She patronised the boy, and she was fond of him, after a fashion, but she never even in thought overstepped the boundary that divided Miss Vere from the crow-scarer. Her life was lonely; it was pleasant to have some one who took a kindred interest in the birth of the last litter of puppies, or in the fate of Sir Bevis of Southampton.

For a long weary while Dick had seemed impervious to instruction, and the girl had well-nigh given up her self-imposed task in despair, when suddenly, like a plant which unobserved has been forcing its slow way through mire, and then bursts into visible blossom with the first warm kiss of the sun, so did light and knowledge come as a flash to Dick's intelligence. Somehow—he never could tell how—the words in his lesson-book seemed clear to him. By some stroke of mental magic the mist of dulness rolled away from his perceptions—he saw, he read, and understood; it was all clear now. He knew how Jack killed the giant, and why the enchanted princess woke up; and, as he felt the supreme and wonderful delight of comprehension growing on him, the rough little face became almost beautiful; it had the wondering, enwrapped expression of an infant or a savage hearing music for the first time.

"Miss Nella," he had said, awed and breathless, "I have read it all!"

"And now," cried Nella, pleased and aspiring, "you shall read 'Robinson Crusoe,' and 'The Admirable Crichton.'"

Meanwhile each child was dreaming in the sun, which struck hot on their brown cheeks, Nella, doling greengages into her mouth abstractedly while she rehearsed her rôle of princess, and Dick, imagining a field of jungle grass, stirred by the ominous oscillation of a brindled tail, and seeing two red eyes, bigger and fiercer than any he knew

## Broken T

f, excepting, indeed, in dream  
shrew-mice grew gigantic, and  
through the gloom of night  
pastry.

Time was giving its best gift  
but they knew it not, and was  
Hope, unaware of all the best  
The pulses of the hours throbbing  
breath of the summer wind nodding  
and in the contact over-ripe seed  
It was a day for swine to bask.

"I will shoot him," thought  
heart," mused Nella. Then  
her visionary heights of glory,

"Jessie has three puppies—  
tan. She likes the black one  
most. Papa said they must be  
them nibbling my hand, I could  
when I'm grown up and rich, I  
books, and sweet things as I like.

"And a gun," suggested Dick  
"Yes, a gun for you, and  
have sisters, or nurses, or new

my sister; she is always telling  
that I had better try to be good  
don't think so at all. Any one  
people can be pretty. Good-bye.

"Must you?" Dick queried.

"Yes; but I will leave you  
There are lots of hard words in  
but you may skip a good deal,  
I'll come again to-morrow;" and  
turned, and presently, by dint  
of her natural dimensions, such  
back through the palings, and  
of the house.

Dick looked wistfully after  
coloured hair, the tattered dress  
She was the representative of  
did she not feed him with exquisite  
she called jam tart. She was

"horses that are running don't suffer that faintish breakfast sort of feeling a man has in looking at a cold blood."

"There's the Oxer coming now," Mr. Vere said, with a gasp in his voice. "Ah, he's over safe!"

The Ritter Bann had cleared it with a mighty bound, the owner's heart jumping with him. Beacon Hill got over, as did all the leading horses. Then came a

Anarchy crossed another horse, which fell—his jacket vanished from the race; it was crumpled on the ground. Some one picked him up, and replaced him on his seat; but he rode weakly, and at the next jump could not prevent his horse from running into the fence and throwing him on to the fence.

"He's badly hurt," Mr. Springle said coolly; "and that's out of the race. So is Anarchy; he is standing lame before the next fence. Now comes the brook. A dash;—two are in. Beacon Hill is over like a flash. The Ritter has half a mind to say no; but Dick has him out of it. Over he goes. There's one run-up, with his man limp as a water-rat on the brink. Over the double post and rails. Over like a flight of—well, all but one. Our brown horse comes to it

"Will he do it? Oh, by Jove!"

"What—what is it?" Mr. Vere cried, rubbing his eyes frantically.

"That," as the trainer said, "come to it steadily;" a handsome bay horse, wild with excitement, and in jealousy, cannoned against the Ritter Bann, and knocked his rider off.

Under the trainer gasped, and the owner's heart

"It's all over now," they thought. But while the race was still high, Dick, who had never lost his nerve, one stirrup, prompt as a lightning flash, swung back on his saddle, amidst an uproar of cheers.

"Never checked the pace," the trainer cried; "he's worth his weight in gold."

So workmanlike a feat, it stirred his sluggish blood to enthusiasm. It was a bold feat, and graceful in its rapidity, and it set women's handkerchiefs flying, and men's tongues ringing.



of, excepting, indeed, in dreams, when sometimes the shrew-mice grew gigantic, and looked at him stedfastly through the gloom of nightmare produced by Nella's pastry.

Time was giving its best gifts to these two children; but they knew it not, and were entertaining the angel Hope, unaware of all the beauty of his invisible face. The pulses of the hours throbbed languidly, the warm breath of the summer wind nodded the wheatears together, and in the contact over-ripe seeds fell from their husks. It was a day for swine to bask in and for souls to dream.

"I will shoot him," thought Dick. "I will break his heart," mused Nella. Then suddenly descending from her visionary heights of glory, she said aloud—

"Jessie has three puppies—one black, two black and tan. She likes the black one the best; she licks it the most. Papa said they must be killed; but when I felt them nibbling my hand, I couldn't let them go. Dick, when I'm grown up and rich, I'll have as many puppies, books, and sweet things as I like."

"And a gun," suggested Dick meditatively.

"Yes, a gun for you, and new clothes; but I won't have sisters, or nurses, or new shoes. I don't much like my sister; she is always telling me that I am ugly, and that I had better try to be good, to make up for it. I don't think so at all. Any one can be good, but very few people can be pretty. Good-bye, Dick; I must go now."

"Must you?" Dick queried sadly.

"Yes; but I will leave you the 'Camp of Refuge.' There are lots of hard words in it you will not understand, but you may skip a good deal, and yet enjoy it very much. I'll come again to-morrow;" and with a nod and a yawn Nella turned, and presently, by dint of a desperate suppression of her natural dimensions, succeeded in squeezing her way back through the palings, and disappeared in the direction of the house.

Dick looked wistfully after the masses of chestnut-coloured hair, the tattered dress and begreened stockings. She was the representative of material enjoyment; for did she not feed him with exquisite mysterious food, which she called jam tart. She was the telescope which had

shown him the dawning glory of the new star, his mind. Without her he was hungry and blind. She explained hard words; she made confusion clearer.

"I can't understand it without her," he said piteously, turning over the pages of the book. "I wish she wouldn't go away." He hid his treasure in the hedgerow, and then recommenced his proper task of persecuting the crows, who were walking down the furrows with their heads on one side, looking solemn and preoccupied as a priest preparing his sermon.

"Hoo, hoo, hoo!" wailed Dick. "Shall I always have to be hooting at you crows, or shall I some day have a real gun like Master Gilbert's, and shoot an eagle from the clouds?"

As the little figure roved hither and thither, the paling fancies of the day deepened into decided red and grey. To the west was the flush of those southern worlds in which Nella had told him even the air was painted gay by coloured birds. In the north was the pine gloom and the slow shadow of the grizzly Bear, blotting out the faint moon. Dick liked the red disc best, and as its golden fables held his thoughts, his face was bright with its transient glory even as the brown, unlovely clods were transfigured by its light.





### CHAPTER III.

#### AN OPENING FOR DICK.

"**G**IRLS," said Mr. Vere, looking up from his newspaper (it was one of Mr. Vere's trials that, owing to the distance between Vere Court and the railway station, his *Times* was twelve hours old ere it reached his hands. "It was like drinking corked claret or eating stale muffins," he said discontentedly)—"girls, your Uncle Ned is coming presently. You must give him something to eat, you know;" and as he spoke he took his second chop on to his plate, a proceeding which left the dish empty.

"I'm sure I don't know what to give him," Dora murmured. "There is nothing in the house but bread and eggs."

Mr. Vere, pretending not to hear, ate the faster.

"I don't object to Uncle Ned," Nella said irrelevantly. "He never bothers me."

Then silence fell on the group. Poverty and taciturnity are not uncommonly akin. The solitary lives led by the Veres forced them to seek their interests in remote subjects. Nella was so absorbed in the fate of the Duke of Rothesay, that in her abstraction she held a piece of buttered toast suspended in air near her mouth, forgetting for the moment its destination.

"I think I see uncle coming down the path now," Dora remarked calmly.

There were no clattering wheels, no bustling servants, no tramping horses, no fine dresses put on, or smiles assumed for the occasion; such receptions are for the rich; the poor and familiar guest crosses your threshold swiftly, like a dog, too inoffensive to be whipped, too insignificant to be petted. The tall thin form slouched nearer, and presently Mr. Edward Vere entered the sitting-room, so quietly that he in no way interfered with the harmony of the evening hour—an hour in which the time of the day waxes solemn and faint as the dying notes of an organ.

"Glad to see you, Ned," Mr. Vere said kindly, while Nella edged off her chair and stuck up her chin to be kissed.

Dora was gracious. She was perpetually rehearsing "company manners," and had an idea that she could play the *grande dame* very well if she only had the opportunity.

"So glad to see you, dear uncle!" she said.

And "dear uncle," whose perceptions were acute (who but the rich can afford to be obtuse!), smiled slightly at the self-sufficient tone.

"Any news, Ned?" Mr. Vere asked. He put aside his paper, and his face said—"Come, amuse me. Why don't you begin?"

Uncle Ned ordinarily lived in London. His means were too small to permit of his going much into "society;" but he belonged to a club, where he met one or two bachelor friends, and read the newspapers. Accordingly he was well posted in all the fashionable calumnies of the day. He could acquaint his brother with the latest flaw discovered in the character of a woman or the leg of a horse. Country tatlers must content themselves with watching the blight of crops, or the paucity of their neighbours' game. Town tatlers make their pleasure out of mildewed reputations. Uncle Ned was one of the *flaneurs* of life—a well-bred vagabond, kindly-hearted, easy-tempered, he wore his poverty lightly; he calumniated (it was his profession), but rarely condemned. He adored women, and disbelieved in them profoundly. He trusted men, excepting in matters connected with horseflesh. His greatest affliction was comprised in the fact that he was

over fifty years of age, and had never owned a good horse. Sometimes in his dreams he saw a beautiful vision—some half-dozen restless thorough-breds zig-zagging in front of a starter's flag. One, a long, low, fashionable-looking bay filly is first off. The crowd is dense before the anxious owner, so he swarms up a post in company with a dirty urchin whose mission in life is to stand on his head for pence. The bay is leading. She wears the Vere colours, crimson and grey. She is first favourite, and Arcadia is her name. Presently an insidious fiend, otherwise an experienced old chestnut, begins to make running for a stable companion. Then the said companion steals to Arcadia's quarters. In his sleep Uncle Ned sighs with excitement, while the post gets slippery under his damp hands. The race is a short one. There is a dip before the last quarter of a mile is reached, and then a hill rears its front, like an enemy as it is, before the straggling field of horses. The urchin (and his ugly face shows as divine as one of Murillo's cherubs while he says it) cries, "'Cadia has lots in hand!" but the chestnut's friend makes his effort, and shoots out far ahead of the favourite. A confusion of voices canvass the chances. Men grow quiet and women fidget with excitement. For an instant colours, riders, and horses are blotted from sight by the twist of the hill. Uncle Ned's eyes ache with staring. A horse flashes up the hill two or three lengths ahead of the others, who seem to be left standing on the brow. The satin jacket glitters like fire on the quiet figure of the rider. He has had no need to take up his whip, the mare has answered generously to the hill. She shoots forward like an arrow speeding swift and vibrating to its goal. The muscles lie like steel cords on her neck, her sides are unscarred, her chief opponent has died away to nothing. Arcadia is winning, and what with the uproar of the crowd, the heat of the sun, and his own excitement, Ned Vere feels his head turning giddy, as he whispers, "Oh my beauty! my beauty! Look at her head, the true Venison eye! There's quarters for you! Take eight hundred for her? Not I, sir. Why I shall enter her in the great Moslem Stakes, and she'll win me heaps of money. She's by Fool's Paradise out

of Venison by—— What the devil's the matter with the pole!"

For lo! the pole seems convulsed by an earthquake; it sways furiously, and then falls with a crash, and poor Ned Vere, with a great throb at his heart, awakes to the memory that he has eaten an indigestible supper, and that he has never owned, never is likely to own, anything more valuable than a certain unpromising yearling colt, which had been given to him by a friend who was weeding out his stud. and which was now occupying a certain small paddock in Vere Park. This colt was the real object of Edward Vere's visit to his brother's house on this summer evening, and after he had finished his somewhat scant repast, he strolled away to the paddock where his idol dwelt, and there stood and did homage to it.

"He's come on wonderful, sir!"

This was from a sympathetic old groom, who had once been a helper in a trainer's stable.

Then began a duet of commendation, such as nurse and mother sing over a babe.

"Did you ever see such knees, sir? There's hocks! You should see him move! Hoorosh—ush—ush!"

Wild wavings of a tattered hat produced the desired effect, causing the object of admiration to toss its head, lash out, then gallop wildly round the field, turning the corners with reckless abruptness.

Uncle Ned looked on with admiration. "How well he lays himself out!" he said, in an awe-stricken voice.

"Unless I'm much mistaken, sir, we've got a really good one in him," whispered Isaac, for caution comes as naturally to a stableman as obliquity to a crab. "He's the finest colt I've seen for many a long day. Thankee, sir!" The half-crown which Isaac had wiled away from Mr. Vere's pocket, showed that the former had not studied human nature in a training-stable for nothing.

Truth compels us to own that the brown colt was a by no means extraordinary specimen of its class. It was tolerably well shaped, but it had a plain head, and a malign, small eye.

"He has been well handled," Isaac suggested, "and is quite ready for his schooling. If you like to give me

boy as a help, sir,—because, you see, I've got the carriage horse and Miss Nella's pony to look to as well as my other jobs,—I'll soon have him in work for you."

Uncle Ned hesitated. He would have gloried in sending his favourite to one of the most fashionable training establishments. Had not Gilbert contrived to send his oafs of boys to Eton?

"I don't suppose I can do better," he said, with a sigh. "For the present, at least, I must leave him in your hands. You can engage a helper at my expense."

Issac was delighted. In his mind's eye he saw the future assistant doing various odd jobs, unconnected with this especial object.

"Very well, sir; I know a lad who would suit, and who is very handy and bold with a horse."

"Who is he?" Ned said indifferently.

"They call him Dick, sir; but he never was named, and his pedigree is dark."





## CHAPTER IV.

### DICK'S PROMOTION.

**N**O more crow-scaring for Dick; no more watch and ward to be kept over the bosom of the great brown fields; promotion had come to him. He was told by the people who had charge of him that it was a very fine thing to go into the Squire's service. His rough, but not unkindly, male guardian resigned his charge with a brief but emphatic warning:—

"Tell no lies, give no sarce, or I'll come up and hide you."

The woman, woman-like, was consolatory and hopeful:—

"Who knows, Dick, if you keep right, go to church regular, and stay there a good many years, you may one day come to wearing breeches and boots, and a real hat."

Behold Dick, mounted on a pail, expending his energies on a very tall horse, and hissing violently. He did not yet know his duties, but he felt sure hissing was one of them, for Isaac, in the next stall, was as sibilant as a steam-engine. Presently the old horse, indignant at feeling something like a fly tickling his sides, lashed out, and upset Dick and the pail. Dick got very red, picked himself up again, and shook his fist at the equine offender, who by this time was looking calmly unconscious. "Whoa, ho! Now get up, can't you? Sta



over!" Dick cried, making his voice as fierce as he could.

Isaac came in, rebuking. "A horse isn't a crow," he said; "howling at a horse is no manner of good. Now, if you're a good boy, and attend well to all I say, I'll make a stableman of you—that's to say if you don't run to flesh; boys have got a nasty trick of growing big."

"I should like to be big," Dick said rebelliously.

"Then you'd be no good at all in the world. Poor Jem Dodger used to say to me (he was the great trainer, you know), 'I get quite heart-broken, Isaac; I don't know whom to trust. I give these young rascals a first-class education; I pay for them; I teach them proper morals—such as never to pull a horse except by the owner's orders; I watch them as no Turk ever watched his wives for fear the ring should get at 'em; I give them hands instead of wooden stumps; I encourage bandy legs; and just as I get a lad finished, he sets to work to grow up, and not all the wasting in the world will keep him under. Out of twenty of my best boys, fifteen have come to steeple-chasing, 'cause they can't ride a decent weight, and from the steeplechase-jock to the publican there is but a stone's difference.' That was Dodger's opinion, and Dodger was the best judge of boys and horses in England," concluded Isaac. "So, Dick, let's hope Providence will keep you a feather-weight. Come here now, and I'll teach you how to wash out a horse's feet. Sissing won't do everything, you know."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Midsummer holidays begin to-morrow," Nella observed at breakfast-time the next morning.

"Oh," said Uncle Ned hastily, "I'm so sorry, Gilbert, to think that I must leave you to-night, and shall thus escape—miss, I mean, a sight of my nephews."

"Must you go?" the other brother remonstrated ruefully; "you would be a great resource to the boys."

"Boys are not much in my line, Gilbert."

Nella murmured confidences into her uncle's ear,—

"I've been hunting everywhere for Max's tools and Gilbert's spade; I don't want them to find out I priggled 'hem."

"What would be the result?"

"Oh, they'd bowl at my legs, or always make me fag out at cricket, or they wouldn't tell me of any of their secrets; but I can always pay them out."

"Indeed; how?"

"A girl," Nella said sententiously, "can always tease better than a boy. I can nearly drive Gilbert wild. When we are sitting with papa, so that Gilbert daren't fly out, I make faces at him. That works him up. At last he complains—'Gov, Nella's making faces at me.' 'Make them back again,' papa says, very cross at being disturbed."

"Don't you love your brothers?" Uncle Ned asked, rather shocked.

"Um," was the doubtful response. "Max is pretty jolly; but I should like to kill Gilbert sometimes; once I nearly did."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; it was when poor, dear mamma was alive. We were all very much afraid of dear mamma; before she got to be an angel in heaven she hit very hard. Her box on the ear would make the head swim for a week. Gilbert told tales of me to her, and so I ran at him with the carving-knife; but it only just grazed the skin," Nella added, with a slight touch of regret in her voice.

"Oh the delights of domesticity!" Uncle Ned muttered as he went to prepare for his return to London. "Surely 'tis best to be a bachelor and pay one shilling for seeing the wild beasts at the Zoo instead of bringing up a colony on one's own hearth."

Before he left the Court he gave a parting injunction to Isaac.

"Do what you can with the colt; I'll come again soon and see how he's getting on. I shall enter him for a great race, and if we live to see him win it, by Jove, Isaac, I'll give you £50."

"If you'll take my advice, sir, when you come to the training of him, you'll send him to some stable where there's only one or two kept. Every leather flapper is a crack in a small string; in a large training establishment, all moderate horses either go to the wall alto

gether or are galloped to death to make play for the better ones."

"I'll bear in mind what you say, Isaac; but I've a presentiment that I have got a real good horse."

Isaac shook his head sadly.

"Presentments aren't no good," he said. "I go by public form; but I've got a promising lad to ride the colt. Some boys take to it like bits of india-rubber; others, like wooden boys," Isaac went on enthusiastically. "This one is made by nature for a jockey. Look at the dip in his back, the close grip of his knees; how his hands give and take."

Dick, who was exercising Nella's pony, now approached them. Ned Vere looked at him keenly. Any one connected with the welfare of his sole hope and pleasure, possessed a strong interest for him, added to which, something in the boy's air arrested his attention. Mr. Vere rarely forgot any face he had once seen, and this one was the echo, or rather the minified duplicate of a countenance very familiar to him. "I know those eyes so well," he murmured; "whom is it he so resembles?" He puzzled for a while, but could not solve the doubt. On his homeward journey, the question haunted him with the irritation of a partially remembered melody. Then he fell asleep and forgot all about it.

That night, when he was dining at his club, he heard a voice near him, saying—

"I want to find a pony for my boy to ride,—good-looking and quiet. Can you assist me, Vere?"

The speaker was a man of about five-and-thirty. His fair hair was cut close, his tawny moustache covered his lips; but his eyes, full of pale blue light, and the somewhat peculiar depression of his eye-brows, formed part of the answer to the query which had worried Mr. Vere all day.

"It is *you*," the latter muttered.

"I beg your pardon; I did not quite catch your meaning."

Mr. Vere apologised. "I was thinking where I had seen a boy—a pony, I mean, which is your form all over. How soon do you want it?"

"As soon as possible. I am going down into the country to-morrow to stay a day or two with Mrs. Alymer, at the Limes, in your county. My son is going with me; he isn't over strong, and the doctors recommend horse exercise for him. I want a steady little Shetland, which has been in the habit of carrying children."

"Mrs. Alymer's house is but a short distance from Vere Court," the other said reflectively. "I'll get my brother to send you over a pony I know of for approval. I think it would suit you very well."

After a few more words, the fair man moved away.

"Who is that?" said Mr. Vere, answering the query of a bystander. "That is Sir George Erle, the model moral baronet. His mission is to redeem the character of his order, hitherto linked with all the wildest crimes in fiction. To sum his virtue and genius in one sentence, he has 'never been found out.' He fell in love eligibly with a rich widow, Lady Dionysia Bonton. The lad he spoke of must be their son. He will be a windfall for the priests and the chaperones one day. Dear me, I saw a little chap at Vere the other day who I'll be bound is quite as good form as young Erle; but no man would try to prevent his turning Mahomedan, nor any mother seek to ensure his monogamy."

"Has Erle only one son?"

"I only see one entered in Burke," Mr. Vere answered, fingering the leaves of that volume.

Ere he left the club he wrote a few lines to his brother.

"DEAR GILBERT,—

"Have you got a horse to sell? Most poor men have. If Nella is growing too big for her pony, you might sell it to Sir George Erle, who is to stay at the Limes next week. He wants such a one for his son. Dick, the new boy, had better show the pony, as he rides well. Do you know Mrs. Alymer, the mistress of the Limes, a charming little woman, but a flirt they say? But what matters what 'they' say, when the husband says nothing, and they all rush to eat her dinners? For her *chef* is undeniably *sans reproche*.

"P.S.—My brown colt is to be placed in a good stable (Nat Springle's), and I shall send for him and his lad in a few days. Kindly allow Isaac to see the pair through London, as, if the colt kicked Dick off, he might lame himself."





## CHAPTER V.

### A PEEP AT MRS. ALYMER.

**W**HEN she first heard of Dick's elevation, Nella waxed sulky. Her *protégé*, her live puppet, was taken out of her hands. She would no more see his bright hungry eyes shining between the hedge-leaves to welcome her gifts of dainties; no more guide the stumbling tongue and imperfect sense to clear utterance and perception. He would always be busy now. Isaac would take care of that. How could she read fairy stories to a boy redolent of the stable? Besides, Isaac objected to her interfering with his acquisition, even to her lending Dick any of her pet fable-books.

"Pray don't come here, Miss Nella. To see the foolish way gals go near a horse makes me sick. As to those books, will they teach Dick how to bandage a leg or clean a bit? If not, he'd better leave them alone. I don't mind his reading his Bible when he's too tired to do anything else, and I have an old Racing Calendar he can amuse himself with. He's got something better to do now than scare crows from morn till night, and listen about fairies and horses with wings, and such rubbish."

Dick looked at Nella regretfully. "She's going down to the Nine Acres," he thought. "She'll see how the grain's coming on, and she'll feed the two young hedge-pigs with milk. Her pockets are full of apples, I know; they stick out so. Then she'll read and eat them up!"

It was a fine thing to wear tight trousers and a new

round cap, and to look forward to a time when life should be all top-boots and cockade; but meanwhile the sun shone red down the land. In those far-off fields was a wide sense of liberty; when he lived in that little hovel of straw, which he himself had constructed in a nook behind the park palings, he had been impregnated with the atmosphere of freedom. In the grey dawn, when his watch began, he had traversed the range of fields with a vague sense of might and possessive pride. The whole of the sleeping land seemed his. In the mist the crows fluttered away into distant specks at the sound of his weird cries. The farm-house dog was mute as yet; no sound of opening gates; no tramp of hoofs down the road. The early rain blew in his face; the daisies were still closed. In the great house yonder all slept; the inmates on their pillows, the cat on its settle, the horse in its stable. Dick only was awake; and for a time was monarch of all that silence. Dick—whom no one owned—owned at that hour of the day's helplessness a world of his own, stretching as far as the hills which blurred the edge of the horizon.

Then in the evening, when the sun burnt low behind the Vere woods, he would rest from his work by the side of the hedge-row, and watch the dark glitter of the pool's surface, crossed by the quick shadow of a bird, or splashed by the awkward movement of an uncanny toad. Of late he had rarely done injury to any living thing. He mixed so little with his own kind, that he had scarcely learned to conjugate the schoolboy's verb "to kill!" and intimacy with Nella's refined instincts had done much to soften the savage crave to inflict pain or death, which seems to be innate in "the human form divine," especially when that form is that of a boy. Dick was already feeling oppressed by the trammels of civilization; his arms ached with their unaccustomed exercise of rubbing down the horses. He longed for those apples which he suspected Nella possessed; for the tale which lifted him into new worlds. He had left so many old friends in the Nine Acres—the white owl, that haunted the large elm like the round-eyed ghost of a bird; the young hedgehogs, that rounded themselves into palisaded globes at the slightest touch of danger. He thought wistfully of the old hare

that had lived in the field as long as he could remember ; of the Squire's pack of little beagles, that came sometimes and played at hunting her ; of the white butterflies that seemed to rise in showers round the lilac bushes when the sun was hot ; of the tall nettle near the woods, made top-heavy by a wren's tiny nest.

"I count I liked crow-scaring best," he said, when Isaac tried to awaken him to a sense of gratitude.

"Maybe ; but you'll find after a bit you wouldn't care to go back to it. Why, who knows ? if you conduct yourself well, and don't allow yourself to get too big, you'll one day be wearing a satin jacket, all gold colour and red, and winning a race with this very colt."

Dick's cheeks began to glow. The anticipation of triumph, however vague, ever has its charm for the young.

"If you get on well," pursued Isaac, "you'll be sent to Springlet's. They'll teach you what life is there. No one as knows what life is ever pines to come back to rubbisy fields and trees."

"Adam and Eve didn't want to go back to the garden, after they'd been turned out of it," a grave voice said at Isaac's elbow. "They weren't fit to, you know."

Isaac looked round wrathfully. "You're here again, are you, Miss ? I shall complain to your pa !"

"It's no use," Nella replied, with phlegm. "Pa's so used to complaints of me, that they're like begging-letters to him."

As she moved away she made a private sign to Dick to follow her, which he, with the obtuseness of his sex, failed to observe. She came back stamping with impatience.

"Ugh !" she said, "boys are so stupid ; they have no eyes, excepting for their boots and their food. I say, Dick, wouldn't it be fun, when your work is over, if you and I walked over to the Limes, and managed to get a peep into the room where all the grand company are dining ? It's only two miles, and we can go by the fields ; so no one can see us."

Dick brightened. "I've heard there's all sorts of strange birds there," he said. "Can we get a sight of them, do you think ?"



"Oh, yes; and all the beautiful ladies too, who have come down from London. I wonder if Mrs. Alymer is like the picture of Lady Booby."

"She was very pretty," Nella went on, in answer to a questioning look from her companion. "She's in a book papa told me not to read; it was put up in the top shelf, but I climbed up, and somehow the nasty shelf gave way, and I tumbled back, with all the books over me."

"Did your daddy thrash you?" Dick asked, with sympathy awakened by memories of the form of punishment usually adopted with refractory children by parents of his own class.

"He gave me a slap or two," admitted Nella; "but it didn't hurt much, and I had seen the pictures, which was all I wanted. Mind you bring your clasp-knife, and I'll put on my biggest pocket—perhaps we may come across some fruit trees; and we'll get right up to the window, Dick, when it gets dusk, and see all the people with their fine clothes."

As Nella went towards the house, meaning to refresh herself with tea ere undertaking the stolen march on the Limes, she was attracted by the sight of a veil fluttering past the fringe of a distant hedge-row, beyond the park boundary.

Nella knew the veil. The veil meant Dora, and Dora meant the curate. Quick as a bird she sped to the scene of action, urged, in some measure, by curiosity; besides, as she argued, with a malicious chuckle, "If I can catch Dolly out now, I shall be able to make use of it next time I get into mischief."

She kept well out of sight, and was able to creep into the ditch opposite to the hedge behind which the unconscious pair were sitting. She was in time to catch a glimpse of Dolly's cheek, trying to blush as the reverend gentleman imprinted a gentle salute on it. It was from no especial lack of modesty that Dora failed in her effort, but she had so often rehearsed the scene in her mind that it had lost the sense of novelty with her.

"Oh, Mr. Chaunter! what can you mean?" she murmured. This was a leading question, and Mr. Chaunter gasped a little as he realized the nature of the

position his involuntary caress had placed him in. Perhaps he thought that the easiest course lay in silence, or in a repetition of the offence, which, like other offences, had its attractions; certain it is that, after gazing for a moment at his companion with the perturbed expression of a cow doubting whether or no to charge a foe, he prepared to repeat the salute, when a small voice, which to their conscious ears was as thunder, seeming to come from behind them, groaned, "Oh! wicked, wicked!"

The lovers started, both blushed crimson.

"I think, perhaps, we had better go home," the gentleman faltered. "I thought I heard something—or some one!"

Dolly would not resign her prey. "I will walk with you a little way," she answered sweetly; but there was rage in her heart, for she knew from whom that little mocking laugh had proceeded.

Nella danced off, with the gleeful feeling of an old Border freebooter, who had secured a retreat in case of disaster in the foray.

\* \* \* \* \*

Triumphant with a sense of victory achieved over several stiff fences and broad field ditches, the two children came through the Lime Wood, brown, wet, and shining as the old year's leaves that clung to their hair and clothes. The lawn and garden were only separated from them by a ha-ha. The house frowned before them, red and sullen in the evening gloom; lights sparkled in the windows—but nothing short of the hubbub of children and dogs, and the sun of day, made the home of the Alymers appear of an even tolerably gracious aspect. As the children stole up the lawn, now crouching behind a laurel bush or scudding over an open space, like rabbits on the prowl, a chorus of barks from the distant kennels betokened an army of observation. No one else discovered the intruders. The dogs were perpetually entering their protest against trespassers; the human guardians of the Limes were either less watchful or less honest—there is a natural apology for petty depredations in the heart of nearly every domestic servant.

The sword was up to the very wall on this side of the house, so the pair walked noiselessly past windows, re-

viewing in succession a kitchen all aglow, and smelling of heat and food, and a pantry where a complacent-looking butler was testing a bottle of choice Madeira, in company with a pretty housemaid; then came a window from which no light shone, but its shutters were unclosed, and by dint of straining her eyes, Nella discovered the vague white outlines of a rocking-horse.

"It has no tail," she announced, "and I can just see a cradle upside down in the corner. There was a little boy here who died, I've heard nurse say; perhaps this was his room."

Dick looked uncomfortably at the dark panes.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked, doubtfully.

"I don't," was the decided reply. "I think I should like to. There was a dear old thing—a pet jackdaw—and my favourite cat, who died of a trap. I often think I should like to see them again; but then they wouldn't get on at all with my new pets."

They were peering into a room, not dark, like the deserted nursery, nor bright like the servants' offices; it was lit only by a reading lamp and a low fire in the grate. As the children gazed, a door partially opened, and a woman flashed into the room. She was all brightness, from her white plump shoulders to her white kid shoes. The children wondered at the radiance of such a, to them, novel appearance—the white satin robe that made light in every movement, the jewels on her breast sparkled as white fire, the filmy web of lace, that swept from her shoulders to the ground, was gathered together at the breast by some wax-hued blossom.

Nella gazed at her with a vague sense of humiliation. "I shall never look like that," she thought.

The unknown beauty sat down on a low settle by the fire. Did the flame leap up and give such a glow to her suddenly up-lifted cheeks? Nella saw, but did not understand. The deep-coloured eyes, that had looked furtively from between their heavy lids, like dim stars, when the lady first entered the room, shone gloriously. The cheeks, ears, and throat seemed smitten by flame. She rose and moved towards the door.

She was like the statue of Eve at home, Nella thought, she was so white, so round.

The vision was met on the threshold by a tall young man, who, instead of kneeling at her feet, as Nella half expected he would do, signalled his entrance by stumbling over the white veil and tearing a rent in it. The jewelled bracelets glittered obliquely, and the white arms slanted upwards as the lady fastened one of the blossoms that had decked her bodice into his coat; his lips were in suspicious proximity to her finger tips, when a dinner-bell rang noisily. The romantic attitude, the drooped heads, the pensive air of the lady, all was as graceful as an idyllic sculpture, until that common-place sound broke the spell. To the girl watching at the window, they had suggested memories of picture groups of Faust and Marguerite, of Cupid and Psyche; it was a disenchantment to see how Cupid settled his collar and stiffened his back, and to hear Psyche cry, "Pray let us go; the soup will be cold." The latter lingered an instant alone in the room. Was it to bask in memory's after-glow, as she looked at her finger-tips? No; she darted to a mirror, and rapidly extracting from her pocket what looked like a puff of swan's down, she applied it to that side of her brow which Cupid had brushed with his curls. "He had taken it all off," she muttered; then she too left the chamber to its dim solitude.

Dick looked on with indifference.

"I count it's the master and missus," he said simply.

Nella doubted. The youngest of her sex, however innocent, is a genius in love affairs.

"I don't think Mr. Alymer is so young as that gentleman. Let's have a peep at the dining-room, and see who is sitting at the top and bottom of the table."

Dick wrinkled his nose against the next window.

"It looks nice," he whispered; "but they don't eat as if they were hungry. How dainty they seem! They look down their noses at their food, as Gyp does when her supper is all meal and no offal."

"What beautiful flowers, and how the silver glitters! But they can't enjoy themselves," chimed in Nella, "for they have none of them got a book."

"Nor a pipe," added Dick, "And how the men in red keep teasing them! They won't let 'em fill their mouths, but keep snatching away the plates. I wonder it don't make 'em snappish, as it does old Gyp."

"There's the beautiful lady at one end of the table," observed Nella; "but the gentleman at the other end is old and ugly. The one we saw is at the side; he does not look at her; he is talking to that fair-haired girl, and laughing. The white lady is not laughing; she is crumbling her bread to pieces, and—oh, Dick! what are you doing?"

There was the sound of a smashed pane, a cry from Dick, and the vision of a grey-arm sleeve protruding through the fractured glass.

"Cut and run!" Dick (loyalty supreme in danger) cried hastily. "Get round the corner, and down the wood. They're after us!"

The scene within had changed its character. The repose of the stately ceremony was broken. In all her distress, Nella laughed as she ran at the recollection of the astonished, indignant air of one red-faced old gentleman, whom the unexpected noise had startled into prematurely swallowing a mouthful of hot soup, he was so like the pompous turkey-cock at home, whose prevailing expression was, "I'm surprised at you." The ladies looked startled, and as soon as they recovered themselves planned attitudes to illustrate the occasion. The Psyche of Nella's romance stole a glance at Cupid. Women have a marvellous faculty of playing every melody of their thoughts on the three notes which sound "him." Then, to be impartial, she rapidly transferred her gaze to the grey-headed gentleman at the head of the table.

The younger man left his seat, and hurried to the window in advance of the servants, who were unanimous but tardy in their movements.

"Stones!"

"Poachers!"

The oldest and plainest spinster at table recalled Mrs. Opie's "Ruffian boy," and a youth whom she had refused in haste, and regretted at leisure, and whispered—

"Murderers!"

"Some horrid little boy," the lady in the white dress suggested, and every one felt somewhat affronted with her; but the idea was too plausible to be resisted, and dinner was resumed.

"Won't you come back to your soup, Mr. Rolfe? It is getting cold."

"Pray excuse me. I'll be back in an instant. I should so like to catch him!"

He lifted the sash, and was through the window in an instant. He had quick eyes, and had detected a movement in some shrubs by the boundary path.

The children heard the sound of the opening window, and ran until their hearts seemed to bump in their mouths. They lost their heads, and huddled together like frightened sheep. Hence, when Dick slipped up on a mossy stone, Miss Vere collapsed over him, and fell panting, but silent, as their tall enemy came up to the spot.

"It *was* a boy," he said, for it was too dark to distinguish Miss Nella's petticoats, and he put down his hand to clutch his prize.

"No, it's a girl!" Something had scratched his hand vindictively. Then Dick made one effort at rescue, and rolled between his enemy's legs, but was caught immediately, and kicked into an upright position. Nella, finding physical effort was useless, took refuge in that last feminine resource—her tongue.

"Two to one!" she cried bitterly, "and you call yourself a gentleman, and hit a girl too!"

"Madam, it is dark; but I ought to have known your sex by your nails. Accept my apologies, and your liberty," the enemy said with mock gravity; "but as for this other individual, he used his fist, and tried to capsize me, so I suppose I am justified in calling him a boy, he must come back with me to that window, and explain the motive of its fracture."

"He didn't do it on purpose," Nella gurgled, "his elbow went through, and oh, do let us go, there'll be such a row if we don't get home soon. Martha will have locked up the supper things, and I shall feel so empty when I go to bed; and Isaac will have read his prayers, and he's so cross after that."

"When he's trying to feel good, he always thinks I want a thrashing," Dick chimed in dismally.

"Tell him you won't want another one to-night," was the ominous reply. "You little wretch, you've frightened the ladies; you've half-choked the old gentlemen, who, not having too many teeth, object to being taken by surprise at their meals, and you have given me an indigestion, running so fast between courses. I must show the company the cause of all these evils—and then I'll give you the very best thrashing you ever had in your life."

"Even there you'll be beat," Nella interposed, unable to economise her last resource, "Isaac is a master in the art."

All this while Dick was being dragged into nearer proximity to the fatal window, with his legs rebellious, like those of a jibbing horse. Nella followed at a little distance, frightened, sulky, but faithful, as children and dogs are wont to be; but when she saw the lights and shadows of the company round the dinner-table, her courage failed her, and, giving Dick a friendly pinch on the arm, she whispered, "I'm off to the wood," and presently slipped away unnoticed.

Dick was dragged through a side-door, and left in the charge of a footman, whose powder was sadly discomposed by the struggles of his active charge.

"I have caught the offender, Mrs. Alymer. Would you like to see him?"

"Is he very murderous looking?" some one asked very uncomfortably.

"Put him in the strong room, and lock him up until morning," the old gentleman Nella had likened to a turkey-cock said testily.

Mr. Rolfe smiled. "What a refinement of cruelty. Expose a burglar all night to the sight of plate he is unable to steal! I think, ladies, you had better see the culprit, in case your dreams to-night should exceed the truth. John, bring him in." And every face and, as it seemed to him, every glittering light had its gaze fixed on the unhappy Dick, who came in with the downcast head of a dog which has been caught poaching.

A small, but lithe child, with sky-blue eyes, blinking uncomfortably, with face bright as a frosty night, and ruddy cheeks which even alarm could not pale, he was in striking contrast with that delicate-faced company, some of whom looked like rare exotics, pruned nearly to extinction. A lad, a year or two younger than Dick, sat near Sir George Erle, who was one of the guests. This youth, who was dressed to perfection, had, like Dick, hair curly and exquisitely fine; but he looked at the crowd-boy as a young Olympian might have eyed earth-born Ixion. To him Dick was not another boy, he was another species; and, slightly lifting his eyebrows, as that atmosphere of sodden leaves and grey vapour entered the room, young Erle said, in a low voice—

"Papa, why do they let that fellow in here, where we are eating? He is quite a common cad."

"My dear, your tutors teach you ill. We are all common clay. Dress and dross are but superficial marks of distinction. Your inferior in birth may yet be an intelligent freeman, possessing a vote—and—Hullo, Rolfe! don't bring that fellow so close to us."

Meanwhile a torrent of questions poured on Dick.

"Why did you do it? Had you any accomplices? Did you mean to hit any one in particular? Were you set on by any one? What was your motive?" they urged.

"We—that's to say I—wanted to see you."

"Wanted to see the spoons, more likely," the old gentleman said severely. "Let there be an end to this farce, Nest" (this was to Mrs. Alymer), "let the boy be locked up, and to-morrow we'll have the matter thoroughly investigated."

"I can't stay here!—and I must go home!" Dick said defiantly. Suddenly his eyes rested on the lady in white satin, and a gleam of roughish intelligence sparkled in his eyes. "I may go—mayn't I, mum?" addressing his appeal to her.

"You must ask my cousin, Mr. Rolfe," she said, indicating his captor. "He has a right to dispose of the game he brought down."

"You looked much kinder just now, when I peeped in at the other window," Dick pleaded meekly. Then he



turned to Mr. Rolfe. "Do let me go, sir!" and by a twinkle the innocent blue eye won the game.

When, a few minutes afterwards, Dick rejoined his companion by the woodside, his pockets were filled with dainties.

"How did you get them?" Nella asked admiringly.

"A wink did it," Dick said; and the two got home happy, undetected, and with sticky mouths.

"Mrs. Alymer, what a bad system that is of keeping open your curtains to so late an hour," Walter Rolfe said, as he wished his hostess "pleasant dreams" that night.





## CHAPTER VI.

WE FROLIC WHILE 'TIS MAY.

NELLA'S JOURNAL.

“**S**ATURDAY, July——.—I am going to keep a journal—girls often do it in books. I wonder what they write about! I have filled in the dates, and now I don't know what to say. The boys are coming home to-morrow. I am half glad and half sorry; there will be more nice things to eat, but then the boys eat faster than I can.

“This journal-book cost me half-a-crown. I have been obliged to go in debt to the birthday-fund to buy it. The birthday-fund is the half-crown which we always give each other on our birthdays;—generally, the same one goes the rounds. Dick and I went for a walk last night. I shan't say where we went or what we saw, as I'm sure to forget to lock this book up. It was very jolly, though I daresay the boys would scorn it. They only seem to think it's jolly when some one is hurt, and I am generally that some one. The days are growing dark and mad; the wind never stops stripping the trees; and the fowls look so uncomfortable when they are being blown the wrong way; fortunately for the peacock, he has lost his tail.

“*Sunday.*—This is not much different from other days, except that papa sleeps rather more than usual. Dora looks extra clean, and I feel extra wicked. I suppose it's because Martha will wash me and comb my hair so much,

which hurts. In the afternoon we all go to church; the boys in the opposite pew make faces at me—I suppose they think that because I'm a girl I can't hit out with my left. There is one boy in particular whom I hate; he sits in Mrs. Alymer's pew; he has red-brown curly hair, blue eyes, and pale cheeks. I think I could thrash him. After church we go home and have tea. Papa goes to sleep, and the curate drops in. Dora gives me a look, as though to beg me to go away; but I pretend not to notice, until she whispers that she'll give me one of her books if I'll go. I take the book, to make sure, and walk off to an attic, where there are apples; I stuff my pockets, and go to the stable. Dick and I climb up to the hay-loft; as it's Sunday we don't read 'Ivanhoe,' but sit and talk of what we'll be when we grow up. Dora says I shall never be anything but a tiresome, plain little girl; but the old cedar that creaks by the window, and the west wind that blows the thoughts to me from other countries, tell me something different. One day I will be something—what, I don't know—but the church-bells sing about it in the wind, and the bells kept their promise to Whittington.

"*Monday Night.*—Dick went away this morning; he cried a good deal as I stuffed some food in his basket. I think he was sorry to leave, and sorry, too, to think he would have no more tarts where he was going. The good girls in books always give their humble friends Bibles when they are parting from them, so I hunted up an old one of Dora's, and wrote Dick's name in it in my best hand. He also asked for a copy of 'Jack Shephard;' I didn't dare give *that*, for it would have been certain to be missed. He took my pony up to the Court, but I'm glad to say it did not suit Master Erle, so I've got my darling Furzebush back again. They were very kind to Dick; Mrs. Alymer gave him ten shillings, and seemed quite pleased to hear of his good fortune in going away so far to a regular training-stable, and Master Erle's papa, Sir George Erle, gave him half-a-crown, and some good advice as to how to spend it. He also gave Dick a tract, called 'A Stone in the Foot.' It begins:—'Examine your own shoes, lest the grit of wickedness should creep in, and you be lamed for life.' Dick has bought some

snuff for his old grandmother with the money. He went to bid her good-bye; but she's silly, and does not know him from any other little boy. 'When I grow rich, granny, you shan't want for anything, but have a fire of your own to sit over,' he told her; but she only cried, and asked where her old man was. Wouldn't they let her sit with her old man? And why didn't Nancy come and see her? But both these are dead.

"Isaac has gone to help Dick through London with Uncle Ned's colt. He cried a good deal when he said good-bye to Gyp. He kissed her, and she wagged all over, thinking he was going to take her for a walk, and I had to hold her, when she found he was going without her. She struggled and whined, with her eyes moist and eager, as he went down the road, and as he disappeared round the last corner he turned and looked at her, and I know he heard her whine, for his elbow went up to his eyes.

"*Wednesday.*—The boys are come. They promise to let me play hockey, and not to hurt me more than they can help, if I'll swear not to cry when I *am* hurt. It's great fun being with them, after all. I can't think why Gyp keeps up such a howling. I suppose it must be that she misses Dick."

\* \* \* \* \*

A rich man's son can afford to dally with his future leisurely, and asks, "What shall I be?" A poor man's boy more often queries, "What can I be?" Max Vere longed to be a sailor. His head was full of nautical romances. Life was to be all breeze and sunshine, all storm and adventure. His father objected—

"You'll be poor as Job; and, like all poor people, you will insist on marrying early. If fortunate, you will be employed half your life, and the other half you'll spend in endeavouring to fashion your land home into the likeness of a ship. You will have fearful intervals of leave, in which you will succeed in driving your friends wild; for land-rats don't assimilate well with water-rats. A man gives his life to trade, and dies a Rothschild; a man gives his life to his country, and is rewarded by such an income as condemns him to travel second-class all his life."

"What am I to be, then?"

"You are to go into the army. Fortunately, your Uncle Ned has a little interest, and can get yours and Gilbert's name down for commissions in the Line. I will give you your outfits, after that you must take care of yourselves."

"But we shall be just as poor then."

"Possibly; but then your uncle has no interest at all at the Admiralty."

The two boys exchanged confidences, and ultimately admitted Nella to their council.

Max sulked and reddened at the destruction of his hopes. Gilbert, a slight, delicate-looking lad, all eyes and hair, with an incipient taste for literature, also looked desponding. Nella suggested the uniform as a consolation.

"The ugliest in the world," Max said vehemently; "and the higher you get in rank the worse it is."

They were to go back to school the next day; the last term they would ever spend there. On this ground, assisted by harrowing images of future death wounds incurred on the battle-field, when Nella would have leisure to repent of any present unkindness, they extorted much servitude from her; they taught her how to fold clothes and make toast. "All for her good," they said; "you're sure to have to fag for your husband one day, and then you'll be glad you learnt." In recompense, they awarded her a shabby-looking green linnet and a mongrel rabbit—pets which they had imported from school, and which had long since lost what little charm they ever had possessed for their owners. The linnet's song never exceeded a feeble tweet; perhaps a long course of wire-work had taken all the wing out of its voice; and the rabbit did naught but stare and munch; but Nella tried to look grateful. They gave her also a verbal certificate of approval, Max being the speaker.

"This is the last night at home, a night on which the boys always have the largest help of cold plum-pudding at supper, 'cos they don't know when they'll get another one. So keep your eyes off it, Nella. On the whole, 've been a trump. You haven't told more lies than

could be expected of a girl; and you never howled, or peached though we sent a wicket-stump into your head and tossed you out of the high swing. Dora and the governor, too, have not been more objectionable than usual, and, Martha, if you don't pack us up a real good cargo, we'll haunt you when we're dead."

The next day a lull fell on the place. Turbulence, youth, and high-spirits had departed through the gates. Youth remained in the person of Nella; but, left to herself, her high spirits evaporated, girl-like, in little songs and day-dreams. As for Dora, she had ever been staid in manner; she was a middle-aged baby when she was born, taking soapsuds, starched frills, and suffocation under flannels, with a wondering patience that endeared her infinitely to her nurse.

"Sit down and read your book, my dear," Martha advised, seeing her youngest charge wandering about, restless as an exorcised spirit looking for a situation.

"I know them all by heart, and I haven't had time to forget them yet," the girl said dismally.

"Then do some sewing work!"

"Oh, bother!"

She wandered off to the park boundary, and the sight of the familiar field recalled to her mind a letter from Dick which she had forgotten to read in the tumult of her brother's presence—

"Dear and honoured miss," it ran, "hoping this finds you quite well, as it leaves me, only stiff. They've put me on all the nastiest tempered young ones they've got, but I haven't parted company with the pig-skin yet, so Mr. Springle says I've some grit, and if I behave he'll put me up on some good mount in the autumn. I've ridden lots of trials. The brown colt is doing well, but he has a contrary temper, and a round-the-corner eye. I've only been thrashed once, and that was when a horse came down under me at exercise. It wasn't altogether my fault, but Mr. Springle always thrashes his lads when their horses fall; he says it makes the horses uncommon careful. My duty to you, and I hope Gyp gets a walk sometimes. I never see a rabbit jump up

without thinking how the old girl's tail would wag over the burrow.

"Yours respectfully and obliged,  
"Dick."

Nella looked wistfully down the empty path. Her brothers were gone, and there was no one to get into mischief with. Dick absent, there was no one to patronise. She was so dull, she nearly took a resolution to be good; to see whether any pleasure could be extracted from neatness, staid manners, and the evening service at Vere church, all of which Dora affected.

She hastened home to announce her conversion to Martha, who greeted her with a flier of such incredulous disdain, that Nella was fain to slap her face, whereupon the culprit was locked up in a dark room, and was occupied for the rest of the day with schemes of vengeance as dark.





## CHAPTER VII.

SIX YEARS LATER.—NELLA'S DIARY.

“**S**UNDAY, August——.—On turning out a dusty cupboard just now I found a diary kept when I was ten years old. Six years ago. I feel quite old. Dora is married, and is an encyclopædia of domestic troubles. Max and Gilbert are abroad with their regiments. Uncle Ned was here only yesterday. He says Dick is one of the most promising jockeys of the day, and quite trustworthy, as boys go. Uncle Ned looks older about the legs than he did, I think. He and papa pore over sporting newspapers and books all day. Uncle reads all the sale-lists of Tattersalls, and attends every great sale of horses. ‘It’s almost as good as buying them,’ he says. He has still got the brown horse. He called it the Ritter Bann. It has never won a race yet; but uncle can always give such good reasons why it didn’t that he makes you feel that his losing horse was better than the winning ones. It is to run in the great Moslem Stakes next October, and then uncle says papa will get ‘all his money back.’

“Dick is to ride the Ritter Bann in the great race, for old acquaintance’ sake, as a favour to us. Dick is a great man now, and uncle had to ‘present his compliments to Mr. Richard Morris, and ask if he would do him the honour, &c.’

“There were some strangers in the Alymers’ pew to-day. Mrs. Alymer was there; she had just come home, having



been on the Continent for a long while. She was beautifully dressed, and her face is pretty and dimpled as a child's; but somehow she put all my Sunday thoughts out of my head. There was a lady with her much older, but handsome too, and by her side was a tall boy, with curly hair. After church Mrs. Alymer introduced the vicar, Mr. Smyth, to the elder lady.

"'Lady Dionysia Erle, this is Mr. Smyth, your husband's old friend and tutor. And this, Mr. Smyth, is Derrick Erle, your future charge. Will you come and dine with me to-night, and discuss matters?'"

"Mr. Smyth bowed, looking pleased.

"Willie Smyth, his son, pinched my arm. 'I shall have to lick that young fellow,' he whispered, 'if it's only to take the curl out of his hair, and the shine off his hat; but I mustn't spoil my governor's prospects by letting out my intention.'

"An odd scene occurred near the churchyard gate. One of our congregation, an imbecile old woman, who sits near our pew (and is always so melancholy and quiet that the church-robin, who won't go near the boys in the loft, hops on to her rusty black skirts,) hobbled up to Master Erle, as he was following his mother, and peered curiously into his face.

"'What do you want, my good woman?' he asked, rather haughtily.

"'I wanted to see if you favoured your father,' she said. 'He was a fine gentleman on his outside; but he'll be food for worms, as Nancy is. Then he'll know what God thinks about him.'

"'What is this old woman?' Lady Dionysia Erle said, looking astonished and angry.

"'Something that works for life all through the week, and then sits on a hard wooden seat all Sunday, while you rest from doing nothing on a soft cushion, ma'am. Dear, how my poor back does ache, and my knees! 'Tis made hard for poor folks even to pray comfortably.'

"'Go away, my good woman,' the vicar said hastily. 'Really, Lady Dionysia, I am ashamed that one of my parishioners should molest you. You must forgive her; the old woman is weak in intellect. She was servant in a

great family once, and possibly your ladyship recalls some former mistress who may have encouraged the poor thing's prattle.'

" 'Oh, yes, I was the upper-housemaid,' the old woman quavered. 'I remember my young ladies, their fineries and tricks. My missus used to be civil to every one but the master. My young ladies undressed every evening to go to parties, where men hugged 'em and called it dancing. My young master was just such a one as Sir George Erle—he who learned lessons of Mr. Smyth here, and came over to see me in my cottage. My Nancy was sixteen then. It's very dull in the evenings, my lady. There's chatter everywhere except in my cottage.'

" Master Erle put some money in her hand.

" 'Poor old girl,' he said kindly, 'she seems to have a grievance. Poor people always have, I think. Come on, mamma, the carriage is here. I shall walk home across the park.'

" 'Oh, Derrick, come. I fear it is going to rain. Much better come with us.'

" Master Erle did not seem to hear her. 'Drive on,' he said, and the horses pranced off.

" Mrs. Morris tottered away to a green mound, and plucked some handfuls of grass.

" 'I always pick a flower from Nancy's grave every week. All I've got is here. There's nothing at home but the clock, and I get tired of hearing it tick. It is all here, all here,' she muttered.

" 'Let me see you home,' Mr. Smyth said kindly.

" 'I must tell the gal my bit of news first. I generally find something to say to her. It is good news to-day, Nance. Your boy Dick has grown a wonderful fine lad. He's dressed like a lord, and has given me a gay piece of gold.'

" It was clear that the old woman was wandering, and had mistaken Master Erle for some other boy. Mr. Smyth led her away, reproving her gently for talking nonsense before the gentlefolk. Willie Smyth and I walked to the gate, where Master Erle stood tapping a dainty little cane against his boot.

" He took off his hat as I came near, and addressed

himself to Willie, who looked rougher and more boyish than usual, I thought.

" 'I am coming to your pater's in a few days,' the new boy said. 'Will you let me introduce myself now?' Then he looked at me. 'Miss Smyth, I presume.'

" 'No,' blurted out Willie, 'she isn't my sister; it's Miss Vere.'

" 'Will you allow me to carry your Prayer-book, Miss Vere?'

" In an instant he had my tattered little book under his arm, carrying it as carefully as if it had been bound in velvet and gold. We all walked towards Vere Court together. Willie and I were shamefaced and stupid. Mr. Erle was not more than nineteen, but his manners made him seem old to us. He has been abroad a good deal, it seems, and talks French and German fluently. He was very pleasant and amusing; it was like turning over a page of a new book.

" We were caught in a storm coming home, and we took shelter under a hedge-row. Mr. Erle pulled off his coat, and insisted on wrapping it round me.

" I think I like him. Willie says he hates him, but he can give no reason for his dislike, which perhaps increases it. May be it is because Mr. Erle has a gold watch and a fine coat, and poor Willie has no watch, and his clothes are always suffering from an epidemic of darns. My own clothes are very shabby. Papa says he will give me a new dress after his next visit to Newmarket. He says that every time he goes, but never brings one back.

" Mr. Erle left us at the park gate, which was fortunate, for although papa dresses very well, we do not deal largely with the butcher, for papa says he has so many debts of honour to pay, he cannot afford the extravagance of ready-money tradespeople. Mr. Erle means to call and inquire how I am, which is very kind of him."





## CHAPTER VIII.

### NEST ALYMER.

**S**HE was christened Agnes by her godparents, and Nest by her nurses and lovers. They said Nest was the British equivalent for the German Agnes; but whatever name she bore, she was certain to be called by some diminutive, which was in itself an endearment.

She was the cosiest little woman. To look at her made a chilled foxhunter feel as if he were come within the region of fire, easy-chair, and comforting beverage. She was small, and perfectly proportioned, excepting that the bust and throat were slightly over-developed, in comparison with her delicate round waist and small hands and feet. Her skin was fair and transparent. She was commonly pale, but if anger (often felt, but rarely revealed) flushed her cheeks, their tint was that of a pink sea-shell. Her eyes were blue and candid, unless she were thoughtful, then it was wonderful to see how subtle and intent was her gaze. In self-commune the mask was off her face. Her pretty smiles, with the dimple she could always depend on, and sparkling eye-shafts, were unnecessary in private; and she was eminently practical—in a certain sense, frugal. She rarely squandered anything, even a glance. Sometimes, indeed, a close observer watching her as she entered into the society of those she wished to please, might note variations of expression, seemingly wasted on an audience composed of the family portraits

that lined the staircase; but this was because, like the great tragedian, Mr. M——dy, she sometimes found it necessary to "work herself up" at the wings. She meant no unkind deception, but she could not always be fresh-hearted and effusive. She was at that debatable age which may be seven-and-twenty or thirty—a period when a woman has sometimes forgotten how to feel, in learning how to feign; a mature Ariadne, who does not fail to appreciate her dinner, even though she weeps for Theseus between the courses, and who welcomes the consoling hero with the soft remains of the sentiment eliminated by the departure of the faithless lover. Her hair was sunny brown—a waving crest of gold threads, dipped by vales of shadow. It was loose and soft about her brow, and coiled in thick braids at the back of her small head.

She was fond of sticking flowers over her ears, and bright jewels on their rosy lobes. She believed that flowers in the head looked so "genuine;" not considering that roses do not naturally bloom in fluffy coils of hair, and that a sensitive eye cannot help inquiring for the stalk. The ear-rings, too, detracted in some measure from her cosiness. Her head was all glitter; this made it inharmonious in those twilight hours when a woman's charms, if she have any, are supreme. Still, her low clear voice and gentle movements were counter-charms to her barbaric fancy for decoration. Angry rivals called her step stealthy when she caught them towing some especial prize of her own. She would stand suddenly before them, innocent and smiling, and the effort would "die away to nothing," as racing slang has it; the eye would lose its coquetry, the simper fade off the face of the would-be pirate. Nest's suave manners marked such decision of mind, such ingenious acerbities, that few women cared to provoke her to a contest. Women have a freemasonry all their own, of which the symbols are sometimes of dire import. Men do not always understand that "dear" is an invective. 'Tis pretty to see two fair faces nodding together like twin roses in a kiss; and none but the one can feel how easterly is the blight of the other's breath.

Nest's mouth, when she was happy, had a kissable

pucker about it; it was pink, full, and pouting; it was an expressive feature. One of her symptoms of fury was its tremulousness. She could steady her eyes, but her mouth and hands always blabbed her secret. Had she been a man, she would have adopted the moustache, declared by Fouché to be indispensable to the privacy of a face. As it was, she generally kept her wrath, as she did her sweetmeats, for private consumption.

The nose was an undignified nose; starting straight enough from between the brows, but curling upwards near the tip. She was ashamed of her nose, and rarely showed it in profile—it gave women such an advantage over her, she complained; she could only look impertinent, when with an aquiline she could have been crushing; also it was inappropriate for sentiment—she never dared eye the moon from the balcony, nor stand posed near a Grecian urn.

The first few days of Mrs. Alymer's return to the Limes promised fair to be the prologue to an idyllic country life. She made calls on the sick and poor. She visited the village schools once, plainly clad, and on foot—a graceful concession to the creed of equality she inculcated there, holding aloof from her scholar the while with a perfumed lace handkerchief fluttering about her recusant nose. Another visitor to the school, a young curate afflicted with a provincial accent and victim to a provincial tailor, was too worthless a prize even for the insatiable grasp of a coquette's vanity. So, after a while, Nest sent gifts of books and money instead, and made no doubt but that she had thus taken a short cut to heaven.

She made excursions to Mr. Alymer's farm stock, extolled the beauty of indefinite bundles of wool called prize sheep, and definite masses of fat which were valuable swine, and in her heart voted them not worth the cost of the pair of shoes she sacrificed to them. She and the Alderneys stared at each other with mutually uneasy glances. The heavy look of preoccupation in all the kine was in quaint contrast with her fitful little face. The cow was a Carlyle in expression: the pig a grubber in geology.

"They give me no ideas; they all look as apoplectic as if they had just stepped out of the ark, after forty days'

stuffing with hay *sans* exercise. Take me to see the horses, Ben."

"They made no hay in the East," Ben said prosaically; "and the beasts must have been drawn very fine in condition when they came out."

"You are always so precise," Mrs. Alymer cried petulantly.

Indeed her husband's exactness, whether in trifles or essentials, was in perpetual antagonism to Nest's moral obliquity. Nest sometimes spoke truth; Mr. Alymer always. His light blue eyes were frank as a tropical sun; hers, of a darker blue, were full of cloudy equivocations. He, in good faith, accepted such of Nest's exaggerations as he perceived, as accidents, tricks of haste and inconsideration, and corrected them gently.

"I have been feeling very *triste* all day," Nest would sometimes say to her cousin, Walter Rolfe, when that gentleman had been absent on a shooting excursion. It was a delicate mode of letting him know that she had suffered agonies of melancholy during his absence.

"You sang charmingly to those fellows from the barracks when they called. Young St. Busbie asked you for *Un Bacio* twice over, and you seemed to like the new dish the cook invented for your lunch," interposed her husband.

"Iconoclast!" muttered Nest, with a wrathful glance of her eyes towards him. "Now, why *are* people's virtues so obnoxious? I'm sure my fibs never annoy Ben half as much as his truths do me."

Nest soon tired of her rural idyll. "The country is full of melancholy sounds," she declared. "The cattle do nothing but moan; the sheep wail ah, ah, ah; nature is one unceasing coronach."

After a few days of dabbling in puddles and looking down empty roads, Nest voted herself ill. It was a word that generally meant change of air and cheerful society. Mr. Alymer hastened to anticipate that remedy by one less disagreeable to himself.

"Give a ball," he suggested; adding, "on the condition I don't invade my library with table-turning spirits."

lest brightened, and looked more amiably at the sedate

crows strutting in the meadow without. Visions of a new dress arose to comfort her; it should be white, because men have a marvellous fancy for lamb-like assumptions; and costly in material, to create envy in her own sex. She would have two dangles in attendance—one for show in the ball-room, the other for sentiment in the conservatory. She must organise a quartet of good whist players for Mr. Alymer's benefit. He was apt to wander about the rooms in an absent-minded fashion, like a cat that has not made up its mind where to curl round; sometimes indiscreetly displacing the chairs arranged for *tête-à-têtes*, or by appearing behind his wife unexpectedly, became liable to endearing apostrophes not intended for him.

"Whom shall I ask, dear?"

"The bishop and clergy of the diocese, the naval and military, militia and volunteers," Mr. Alymer said mechanically.

"Comprehensive, but I want detail. It's your own county, Ben; you lived in it some twenty years before I was born. Surely you can tell me something about the natives?"

"To be sure I can. There's Lord Mohawk; he was a bit of a *roué* though. And Miss Jervoise, a lovely girl, but very strait-laced, and all that. Then there's the Bishop of Biretta, and his coquettish little daughter—and, oh, there's a man I knew at Eton—Vere. I daresay he has some little ones."

Mrs. Alymer looked hopeless.

"Lord Mohawk is the patron of the Moral Sewerage Reclamation Society, and has written a tract called 'Dancing and D——n.' Miss Jervoise eloped with an officer quartered at——, and is now a hard-eyed garrison flirt. And Biretta went over to Rome, and his daughter took the vows. Ben, your gold pieces have turned to dead leaves."

"There are the Veres," began Mr. Alymer, looking abashed, as Rip Van Winkle might have done when the epitaph, "Not known," shut every door in his face. "He has daughters, and one of them struck me as being very handsome."

"A perfect savage!" his wife said, with emphasis, "How can you admire such unkempt beauty, Ben?"



"I admire nature," with an affectionate glance at Nest's cheeks. "Your own face is like an unsullied rosebud's, Nest!"

Mrs. Alymer looked a little guilty, and blushed a genuine tint. "Adam didn't lose his innocence when Eve parted with hers," she thought, "but really it is a great compliment to Madame Rougejoue. I must get some more of it."

"I asked young Erle what he thought of Miss Vere's appearance," pursued her husband. "He first said he did not know, and then talked of velvety-brown eyes, rich in shadow as those Murillo paints—two soul-flames glowing in an oval of peach tints. As for her being a savage, he spoke with ecstasy of the beauty that shone the richer in dishevelment. He had seen a rain-smitten face once—but would not confess it to be Miss Vere's—which had first gleamed on him in a hurricane of dead leaves. He thinks henceforth that a storm is the most beautiful phase of nature. What fools these young fellows are—eh, Nest?"

Nest was pensive, and did not assent. What woman ever condemned Anthony or excused Æneas?

"He shall feel in that way about blue eyes and a fair skin," she thought. She was like the Queen of Fableland, who could not bear that any attraction but her should exist in the same district. The idea was a consolation. The ball seemed impracticable; but the notion of securing a fresh admirer—one whose devotions would divert her ennui and rouse lethargic Walter Rolfe to a fever of jealousy—decided her to remain at the Limes a little longer.

Were there not monsters who imbibed the blood of infants to reflash their own? and are there not women who seek to flush their fading tints to revivify their hackneyed sentiments by blending them with the rich emotion of a heart fresh and unseared? I do not pretend to explain or excuse such noxious practices; but I believe they existed and exist, though even to hint of the latter incenses the stronger sex. Men delight in accepting the Madonna type of womankind, ignoring that *Lia Fornarina* was, in truth of the coarsest clay.

Nest thought she would ask Derrick Erle to fish, as a compliment to his mother. She could see then if he looked worth a dinner. If he were very handsome and tolerably impressionable, he should be asked again for a longer period.

Nest was getting rather lazy; like her husband, who, nowadays, avoided riding to coverts where he was not certain to find a fox.

She would first ask Ben's consent. "She did nothing without consulting Ben," she was in the habit of saying; and, indeed, her ingenuity in blending domestic virtues, such as frankness, meekness, and family prayers, with her occult frailties, was a miracle of moral plaiting.





## CHAPTER IX.

SIR GEORGE ERLE'S HEIR.



NELLA'S next entry in her diary, dated six weeks later, noted that "Mr. Erle called very often;" then came another blank of several weeks. Perhaps she began to forget how the days lapsed; perhaps, following the contrary instincts of her sex, she did not care to write now that she had something to write about; that something, it need scarcely be said, was Mr. Smyth's new pupil. Be sure the prince did not fail to create a great sensation in the Enchanted Garden, and that (putting aside the natural magnetism of youth and beauty towards its like) the new cut of his clothes and the hundred years extra polish to his manners gave him an immense advantage over the old-fashioned rivals his touch brought to light.

Nella had never before seen any one so handsome, well-bred, and well-dressed as her new friend. She somewhat resented the latter perfection; it was irritating to look at his neat boots and remember that there was a hole in her own; the fine texture of his coat rebuked the frieze cloth jacket in which she stuck her own little thumbs in her daily rambles.

The contrast did not strike Mr. Erle. He was so accustomed to be wealthy he had forgotten he was so. But had not been accustomed to be in proximity with hand-girls, his mother not having yet found any she

deemed worthy of him, consequently he discovered a novel and powerful charm in Nella's companionship.

Derrick was intelligent to the verge of intellect. Had he been poor, he might possibly have been a great man. Some are possessed by a restless intellectual fire which burns through the trammels of luxury; others also have an inner light, but it is fitful and too easily held subdued by that stress of inertia called opulence. With enough of artistic perception to give a dangerous zest to pleasure, with germs of power in his nature, and no necessity for developing them, with a face, form, and manner eminently gracious, he was one likely to be useless to men, and attractive to women. He had the most deceitful pair of eyes: they were of such a colour as is a blue wave when a cloud shadows it; and, like the wave, they were rich with all possible depth and prone to sudden sparkle: looking at them, you said, he was a genius; but, in truth, he had only glimmers of genius. He had the tenacity of purpose which often makes part of an undetermined character; his isolation, as an only child, from the healthy rivalry of kindred companions had been bad for him. What might have been power was passion; what might have been culture was delicacy of manner. His mother petted him until the unhappy lad had no wish ungratified. And what is life—above all, what is youth—spent without a longing? His only chance of gaining stamina of character was to love some woman who should reject him; or, at least, teach him there were prizes not to be purchased by money. Unfortunately, women have, in this age of brass, such a natural and eager prepossession in favour of wealthy heirs, that there was not much chance of his meeting with the necessary correction to his pampered existence.

Nella was not likely to appreciate his social advantages to their full extent. As you should inhabit a country to learn its language fluently, so is practical experience necessary to enable the fair pupil to detect the peculiarities which distinguish the heir from his younger brother. Mr. Vere had laid down some axiom on the subject, but had lacked means to carry them into effect.

"Take your filly up from grass when she is rising"

teen," he would say; "for the market is so overstocked she can't be entered too young. Break her into artificial paces as soon as possible; for to be too natural in action is worse than improper—it is bad style. Parade her at every public meeting, so that she has no time to squeeze in a prayer edgeways between her nightly ball and morning déjeuner. Incongruity is the abhorrence of all well-bred people, and what can sound more out of place than a hymn clashing with the pretty new valse *L'Embrassade*? If she gives her whole soul to the work, she will soon know how to establish distinctions; she will find that the heir has a delicate air of reserve, an innate wariness of demeanour which no amount of temptation can circumvent. He avoids mothers; he is shy of conservatories. From the earliest marriageable age he has been accustomed to see women scramble for him, as if they were charity children and he a bag of comfits. Consequently, he is inflated and suspicious. Still he will have to purchase a mate some day, if only to perpetuate his fortunate but persecuted race, and there is no reason why she should not try for first place. She will soon learn to avoid those younger sons, who flirt with all the recklessness of the irresponsible. She knows that parents give scant trousseau, and friends shabby wedding presents, to the love-birds who pair on little else but love. If no customer bids for her in her early seasons, she must struggle on until her eyes grow brazen with petitioning for a purchaser, and her face is as familiar in the row as the angles of Apsley House. Failing all, she can take to religion and visiting the sick, a sort of preliminary course to falling back on that last resource of unsuccessful flyers, the country curate."

All this would have been Hebrew to Nella. She was sixteen, and her only desire was for happiness. She had not learnt that diamonds and liveried footmen were the concomitants to bliss. Dora sometimes expressed a longing for these things; but Nella, looking at the gorgeous memorial which had been erected in Vere churchyard to something which was once powerful and wealthy, shook her head.

"You couldn't take the grand dresses down there,  
And when Mrs. Jones was dying she didn't care

a bit for the sovereign which papa at last thought of sending her. I should like when I come to my last minute to remember that I have had a good many joys. To remember I had had a good many footmen would not comfort me in the least."

The girl was an Epicurean in her way, but a very innocent one. She shared with her kitten the delight of basking in the sun, she disputed with the bee the right of revelling in the sweet of the honeysuckle. A summer's day was one of her joys. Others were to watch the red geranium, flaring amidst the deep green weeds of the unkempt lawn, to peer down the rifted trees and be gaped at by callow birds, and then retire to a distance and watch the business-like dabs with which the mother satisfied each want. Such as these were her practical pleasures, while the beautiful dreams suggested by the romances she read sufficed her for inspiration and hope.

Derrick's visits were henceforth to be ranked as pleasures. By degrees the prince seemed to be growing in some sort dependent on her. He looked depressed if she were sulky, and happy if she were glad. What girl can fail to exult in the novel charm of feeling herself to be a power—a power existing by right of sex and beauty, despite the detractions of shabby dresses and defective education? What mattered it now if Martha prophesied uncomfortable results of Nella's hasty method of darning stockings? What availed it that Dora, viewing her sister's increasing bloom with mild displeasure, preached that "beauty is vain?" Nella was detecting the imposture. That which made Willie Smyth tumble over his feet whenever he looked at her, and caused Derrick's handsome face to be sunshine or storm, could not be a delusion.

"Your eyes are very well, my dear child," Dora would say, patronisingly; "but your nose—well, the less said about that the better."

Perhaps Nella's nose was, artistically speaking, a failure. It was fine, but inclined to curl outward like the inside of a bow; but then two roseleaf lips budded glowingly beneath it, and her cheeks were rich with the purest peach tints. As Derrick, with the blind enthusiasm of youth

had likened her nose to that of the Medicean Venus, she felt indifferent to her sister's criticism.

"It is good enough to put straighter ones out of joint!" she cried, with a gleam of her old childish malice. Then she sought Derrick's society once more, to be soothed by his flattery. Not that she was deluded by it, but it was sweet to see him delude himself in her cause. Sometimes the harmony of their growing sentiment for each other was thwarted by childish laughter and childish confidences. It was as a fresh breeze drifting soft cloud films asunder.

They actually forgot their dignity so far as to run races down the avenues, and alight breathlessly in a shower of shaken blossoms, Nella diving like a bird under the lilac bushes, which were the haven she was bound to attain. Mr. Vere was rarely at home. Dora was much occupied, Martha infirm and obtuse. There was only the old gardener to take note of their increasing communion, and he was grateful for anything which diverted Nella's attention from his fruit. When in these moods their conversation degenerated into prattle.

"Are your brothers at school still?" he would ask, with a slight tinge of boyish impertinence.

"No, they are in the army," she retorted, sitting down to hide the gaping shoes, which would have foiled the effect of her next sarcasm. "When are *you* going back there? Isn't it time?"

"Never," he said loftily. "I shall read with old Smyth until I pass my examination for the army," he added, with an air of monopolising the whole brigade of cavalry. "What are your brothers in? The feet! I'm going into the — Hussars." Nella was crushed. A halo of gold lace, plume, and spurs radiated from the speaker by anticipation. He condescended to further revelations. "I'm an only child, you know, and they didn't wish me to follow any profession; but I thought that would be slow. My mother wants me to marry some one very tip-top—because she will be mistress of Erleholt—but as she never let me look twice at the same girl I had no chance of liking one more than another. Between you and me, my mother is a bit of a Tartar."

"I think they must all be like that sometimes," Nella

said consolingly. "I don't suppose yours is worse than others. Is your papa kind to you?"

"He keeps me flush of money and good advice, but he wouldn't get up early to see me off to school, as my mother used to do; so, after all, Tartars have their good points."

"What school were you at?"

"Swellton, of course. Our family have always gone there."

"What did you learn?"

"To cook a devilled kidney, and toast sausages over the gas-flames."

"But isn't it a fine thing to know Latin and Greek? Didn't you enjoy reading about Hector in Homer's own language? To read a good deal about heroes is to think oneself one. I don't understand Greek, but it sounds full-voiced and grand, like the north wind blowing between the hills."

"I got on pretty well with the help of a crib," Mr. Erle said prosaically. "Swelltonians never grind. That is all very well for poor-men's schools. My governor paid four hundred pounds a year that I might be taught discrimination in the matter of hats and cigars. Gastronomy is one of our sciences. When little De Gourmet (aged fourteen), Lord Planefare's son, went home for the holidays, his pater put him through his paces, and, being up to his father's tricks, had got a line or two of Horace and a remainder from his Virgil written on his pocket-handkerchief and wristbands. He went off at score with these; but, of course, he couldn't disperse the whole grammar about his clothes; and what must Planefare do but begin at the very beginning. 'What's the ablative of *tristis*?' asked he. De Gourmet looked wise. 'Only the lower school do grammar,' he said. 'For once condescend,' his father insisted, 'and parse the line from Horace you just quoted.' De Gourmet got bewildered, then angry; he said he had never before wished he were an orphan. The worm will turn, and so will a Swelltonian brought to bay on the subject of false quantities, English grammar, and simple addition. At last he confronted his unnatural parent. 'It's true, sir, that I



can't get further than "Eheu fugaces" without blowing my nose with the pocket-handkerchief you indiscreetly retain in your hand. It is true I was shaky about *tristis*, and that I made a bad shot at seven times eight, and that I don't know two ways about spelling hart; but I *do* know your *chef* is insupportable, and that unless you change him, I shall be obliged to go and live at Limmer's. Your entremets poison me, sir, and your soufflés are soulless."

"What a greedy boy!" Nella broke in; "not but what my brothers were always writing for cargoes, and it was agonies to me to see Martha packing up all the nice things. She said they must have them because they were boys, and when they came home they took them because they were boys. When papa talks of the 'indecent fuss women make nowadays about their rights,' I often think it must be in revenge for all the wrongs their brothers did them when they were children. The boys always have the largest share of nice things, and the smallest of nasty things. They take up all the fire in winter, and make the girls fag for them in summer."

"Were your brothers brutes enough to make you fag?" Derrick cried hotly.

"Do you call being long-stop at cricket fagging? They said I should be very good at it, only when I saw the round-arm balls coming I couldn't help shutting my eyes because of my legs."

With a sudden relapse into sentiment, Derrick, pulling a tuft of grass, asked, "Of what colour are your eyes?"

"Look for yourself," the other said gaily. Then the eyes of both meeting, such a glow came on their faces as may have flushed the new world discoverers.





## CHAPTER X.

FLOWERS ARE LOVELY.—LOVE IS FLOWER-LIKE.

**OW** crystalline was the life of the imprisoned maiden, kept white by being elevated on high rocks, with a waste of sea to keep the doors ; how pure the dreams of her who was held slumbering in a tangle of gardens, while the butterfly poised motionless on the rose, and the sleeper's soul kept quiet through all the vibrations of the outer life ! But there was a sigh that out-sighed the Hellespont, and lips proved sweeter than dreams. "Have you come, my prince ?" the princess cries, as though he had been her heart's expected guest for centuries past.

As the summer bloom thickened Derrick Erle's visits grew more frequent to Vere Court. Was he the prince ? Nella did not ask herself this yet ; but a dim query did sometimes rise in her thoughts as to whether she would ever be any one's princess. She consulted her mirror—reddish brown hair thick and silky ; eyes prompt to flash sharp lights in anger, but sweet as a summer heaven when her soul was in sunshine ; lips red and full ; cheeks dimpled and round ; dark brown fringes of eyelashes, which thwarted each other. By-and-by their shadow, and that of the thick eyebrows, might help to intensify a look of trouble in the dusky orbs, but all was morning in the face of sixteen. Nella looked and pondered in ignorance of her charms. Compared with the delicate perfections that simpered in the keepsakes, she felt herself to be a

failure. Her nose, as Dora said, was not Grecian; it was rather inclined to have a scornful, outward curve. She thought herself more like the young savage in Richter's illustration to the "Island." She doubted her looks, but felt certain that no heroine of a romance ever wore such thick shoes, or ever had her fingers so brown and scratched. All the same, her eyes took to dreaming, and Martha was fain to believe a little in her young mistress's regeneration—seeing that Nella began to tie ribbons in her hair, and to pay a certain respect to clean dress. Meanwhile Derrick Erle was becoming conscious that he had recaptured man's ancient paradise, or else had discovered a new one, consecrated to the young souls that love. Hope was at its sweetest—aspiration at its brightest.

In the hell described by the French preacher the guilty are made to ask of each other, "What time is it?" and the answer is "Eternity." In the brief heaven mortals create for themselves in their sweet vernal hours, the same word is tuned to joy. These two were only in the first stage of the spell as yet. All was vaguely beautiful. It was the tremulous joy of the miner eyeing the first glitter of an occult wealth. They did not know why they were so happy or so awkward; they sulked without a cause, and forgave without reason. Nella would watch for hours for an early glimpse of Derrick's curls, and disappear in a totally opposite direction so soon as he was well in sight. Derrick would feel infinitely mortified, and walk back, swearing never to seek her any more, and kept his word until the next morning. Both grew pensive, and affected solitude; but to Nella the music had gone out from the lip of the leaves, and Scott had grown unaccountably dull. The boy's handsome, ardent face was in itself a romance; and the eyes of the heroes on paper faded out of mind before the living flame of his. One day there was a great quarrel. Willie Smyth had confided to Derrick his intention to marry Nella, "who had given him encouragement," he said.

"What encouragement?" wrathfully queried Derrick, with paling face and lightening eyes.

Willie looked bashful.

"She gave it me in the little green path that crawls

round the orchard. I told her I should never forget that day till I died."

"Till you are da——" muttered the other, but checked the impending oath, meaning to reserve all his wrath for the principal offender.

In his first greeting of her he was so dignified and mysterious, that she could glean no clue to the cause of his displeasure. Finding innuendo too weak to express his feelings, he burst out with—

"What did you give that idiot, young Smyth?" She looked puzzled. "*You know*," he cried bitterly, "in the little green path by the orchard;" then flung away, not to give her the satisfaction of making any excuse or explanation, if indeed she had any to make, which he would not believe; indeed, he should never believe in any woman again.

He told her so in an abrupt, ill-written scrawl, smelling of the cigars in which aggravated feeling had caused him to indulge to excess.

She spoiled several sheets of paper in composing her answer. She did not question his right to life-long incredulity in her sex. As they were never to meet again, it was hardly worth while for her to clear herself from his aspersion; but, nevertheless, she affirmed solemnly that she had given Willie Smyth nothing more than an old pocket-knife, which had been Max's, and which was past even cutting twine. She could not help it if Willie would shape vicious-looking N's on the beech with it. She thought Derrick very unkind, and bade him adieu for ever.

The next morning she went to the grassy path that lurked in the dense shadows of the woodland skirting the park, and took her seat in the swing that was looped 'twixt two tall elms. The woods were thick with leaves and song. An intense sun was browning the meadows outside, but in this glade the flowers were unscorched and fragrant. The girl, looking pure and fresh as any blossom there, swung listlessly to and fro in the balmy air. Life was in tune. The doves said so with their caressive notes; the jackdaws echoed it with faint ugly voices; the west wind said it politely to the chestnut trees, its breath

whitening all the air with showers of their blossom the while.

Nella, swaying 'twixt light and shade, now up near the sun-pierced foliage, where her hair caught fitful glories; now sweeping back to the dewy shadows of the underwood—also sang in her heart, "Life is music." She was glad to be; glad of the sun, of the flowers' odour, of the million voices chirping "sweet" in the air; the air itself, which bent the heads of the roses, and severed the tresses about her throat; glad most of all because Derrick was wroth with her; and, ignorant as she was, she read his conduct as a lover should.

"Drowsy with harmony," she murmured; "I know what that means. 'I'm one with the day, and we're all going to sleep together.'" The bird's song was an echo of the chirp in her heart; her breath was the west wind, and would endure for ever; her form swayed as the flowers. "It was sweet to live," she thought.

A voice said behind her, "I wish I were dead!" Instantly her whole soul was alert, and her whole attitude apathetic. She must have learnt that distract air from coy lapwings. Derrick Erle, looking at her gloomily, said, "I offended you. I was unjust. You will never forgive me, and I wish I were dead. I have half-killed Smyth; but that's no comfort to me if you won't forgive me." Suddenly changing his manner from sullen defiance to cat-like sleekness, he touched her arm gently. "Won't you forgive me, dear?"

"Never," murmured Nella, relenting rapidly. She turned away her face that he might not see its gladness.

"Good-bye, then."

"Good-bye," she echoed softly.

He came opposite to her, and steadied the swing with both hands. "At least let me assist you down," he said ceremoniously. He stood facing her with grave politeness. She assumed a coldness equal to his own; but while she preserved hers he failed him. He suddenly touched her lips with his. A man only touches a woman's lips thus once in his life, and he gives her in that kiss all that he has of the angel in his mortal passion.

Quick as the kiss Nella's face was in a storm of

rebellion, and her hands doubled (the thumbs outside, thanks to fraternal mentors).

"I hate you!" she gasped. "I didn't think *you* would have insulted me. I thought you liked me."

"That's just it. That's why I did it," apologised Derrick.

"It isn't my notion of liking," the young lady said loftily. "Willie Smyth, now, is a true friend. Whatever he may feel, he only sticks his head on one side, and looks awkward."

"Perhaps that's why you don't care twopence about him," retorted Derrick. But she was really angry, and rushed home to the house in a tumult of wounded feeling.

The day was out of tune, after all. Derrick held her cheap. Derrick had put himself utterly beyond the pale of forgiveness, and the worst of it was she shouldn't have an opportunity of forgiving him for such a very long time; for the great Moslem steeple-chases were to take place to-morrow, and Derrick had announced his intention of going to the meeting.

With a dreary sinking in her heart she heard the carriage drive away the next morning, which was to transport her father and uncle to the station.

She should never get the brand of that touch from her lips, she thought; but, still, she could have wished not to have parted in unkindness with the offender just now. It was adding one more bolt of ice to the door of absence.

On his part Derrick was fired with desperate resolves: smoking, betting, billiards, late hours, and early drinks. All the various little deteriorations in which men delight to indulge on the merest subterfuge of unhappiness, he would plunge into. It gave him a gloomy satisfaction to leave his tutor's house unknown to that gentleman. He, Derrick, would probably get into a serious scrape, and the idea comforted him. He should let Nella know it was all her fault. He did not contemplate that Mr. Smyth's anxiety would take the form of a letter, despatched by special messenger to Sir George Erle's country-seat, in which he told his suspicions of his charge's whereabouts.

"This comes of having sons," Sir George Erle said, with an irritated air, to his wife, as though Derrick's faults shifted all proprietary rights in him to herself.

Lady Dionysia cried, "Thank goodness, it's only horses. I was afraid when I first received the letter that the boy was in love. But we had better go and look after him, George."

"It would annoy me very much to be seen in such a place," George said stiffly.

"We shall get there late. No one need see or know you," urged his wife. And, as she was the holder of their wealth, and drew her own cheques, she had her way.





## CHAPTER XI.

### THE RITTER BANN'S LAST CHANCE.

**T**WO middle-aged gentlemen passed a restless night on the eve of the steeple-chase meeting, in which the Ritter Bann was to be allowed a last chance of retrieving his character. Edward Vere awoke before daylight, the quotations he had heard in the betting-rooms yet stinging his ears. "A thousand to ten against Ritter Bann," he repeated resentfully. "I'd take it directly if I only had a tenner." His brother shook his head. He had no delusion about other men's horses.

The day dawned palely through swathes of fog as the brothers trudged through the streets, coughing in a subdued manner behind the folds of their neckerchiefs. Soon the town was a dim nucleus behind them, and they were stalking through a country lane, two blurred shadows of men, slightly bent, and making their walking-sticks take a good deal of responsibility off their legs.

In a voice thickened by a mouthful of mist, Uncle Ned said, "It was here we were to meet."

The sentence had a romantic sound about it. Uttered in Venice, you would have sworn that the speaker awaited a gondola, a gliding blackness deepening the mystery of the palace wall, a woman's hand for signal, a woman's eyes for light.

Who but an Englishman would have watched with such feverish anxiety in the early dawn for that long shadow of



a brown horse and that short shadow of his trainer, Mr. Nathaniel Springle, which now loomed in sight, at four cross-roads about a mile from the town ?

"Here comes either a beer-barrel on four legs or Nat Springle on his pony," Mr. Vere said. "And that whipping-post by his side must be Dick."

The trainer, to follow Mr. Vere's comparison, trundled towards them. Man and horse were a miracle of fore-shortening. The rider was about five feet three in height, and weighed fourteen stone. He had an apology for a neck, consisting of a coat-collar. His hat was of the flattest. His pony, scarcely twelve hands high, was so short in the back, that the saddle covered the whole of it. The rider's face was round and contented ; the pony's square and patient. The frequent burden of fourteen stone is enough to give a Job-like expression to any horse.

"Who would think it to see him now ?" sighed Gilbert Vere. "It seems but yesterday he was riding several pounds under seven stone. If all flesh is grass, Springle must have wintered on green food."

"How are you ?" Uncle Ned broke in, with a look of anxious solicitude towards Dick. "I *do* hope you are quite well, and strong, eh ?"

"He's very well," Mr. Springle said severely, "but he will grow. Nothing but my eyes being always on him prevents his filling out in proportion, and yet he has my sad example to keep him down. I, who was once the lightest of the light. Do you remember how I rode——?"

Uncle Ned, foreboding endless reminiscences from the air of sentiment dawning in Mr. Springle's globular face, broke in with, "How is the horse ?"

Then the Ritter Bann's chances were discussed with such an air of mystery as might have distinguished Catesby and Co.

With solemn emphasis Mr. Springle announced that *he* had "ate all up" that morning and the previous night, that *he* did not fret an ounce, and that if *he* could stand up over this country *he* would take a good deal of beating.

Presently Dick put a spidery leg over *his* side, and three pair of anxious eyes followed the horse's every stride through a canter and a good half-speed gallop of about

one and a half miles. The Ritter Bann took it all with the philosophy natural to a placid temper and a foregone determination. At an early age he had decided that racing was a mistake. He never had tried but once, and then he had been taken by surprise; since then he had given with his ears a decided negative to any effort his jockey "voted urgent."

The party now went home to breakfast, where Uncle Ned, unlike his horse, did not "eat up," and did fret a good deal. Mr. Springle, less agitated, devoured his portion with the recklessness of one who has passed all bounds of outline.

After breakfast they started to look at the course, the trainer only declining the ordeal of a walk over three miles of country. He sat in the grand stand, where he showed, against the sun, like the shadow of a brooding toad. Uncle Ned walked the course, with a face in which anxiety deepened to despair. First came a long meadow, laid in ridge and furrows. In starting, the horses would follow this for about two hundred yards, then they would round a flag, and cross the furrow, until the first fence (an ordinary ditch, with a weakly hedge beyond it) was passed. The next field, also a ripple of ridge and furrow, led to a very formidable stake and bound fence, fully five feet high from the brow of the slight ditch on the taking-off side, and strong enough to hold a rhinoceros. A grass field constituted a quarter of a mile respite. This was succeeded by an ox-fence, low enough, since the rail on the far-side did not look more than two feet high, but the width from the ditch's brow to the rail was fully ten feet.

"Nineteen fences, all told," Gilbert Vere remarked, when the inspection was at an end, and his brother's hopes with it.

"Sixteen feet of bare water, a double flight of rails, strong as they're high, and no end of fly-catching fences, that look bagatelles from the railroad, and require a hunter to get over them. You must have a good opinion of your horse, Ned!"

Ned made no answer. His dejection had been too deep for words ever since he had seen the first big fence. He

could not understand why Gilbert's voice should have a ring of satisfaction in it. It was unkind. "Only a horse or a woman could put a but between Gilbert and me," he thought. He said gloomily—

"I shall not start the Ritter Bann!"

In matters of horseflesh a man's word is as trustworthy as a woman's. Of course the brown horse made one of the field that, an hour or two later, paraded before the densely-packed crowd in the grand stand.

It was all very well for those kid-gloved beauties flaunting in the sun, talking pretty follies to their admirers; or for the swarthy gipsy, trying to eye folk out of their money; or for the sham pugilists, who affected to half kill each other for a shilling. The real anxiety of the scene was not with these. The merchant's clerk, with his little soul, big with excitement as he reflected that he had entrusted a horse with his destiny: that its victory would win him independence, and its defeat—well, he would not dwell on that word. It would be associated with such trouble as makes a man fumble for a pistol in his morning dreams. Mr. Vere, with his nonchalant ease, giving no hint of the stake of honour he had put in the brown horse's power to wreck or save; but with his heart sad all the while, and his ears terribly jarred by the wrangling of the bands and importunities of every variety of mendicant, including the beauties who entreated him to "put on" money for them, which they never intended to repay. It was for these real gamblers (not for those played with loss and gain in half-crowns) that the scene was rife with tragic possibilities.

Uncle Ned's interest was of a more pleasurable character. He was preoccupied, but not with the chance of wealth or ruin. His eyes followed his horse with a mixture of reverence and tenderness. He was the Ishmael in Mr. Vere's desert. A beggar asked him for alms, and he muttered, "It is unreasonable!"

"Only a penny, sir," pleaded the vagrant.

"No horse can get over it," mused Mr. Vere aloud, giving the coin mechanically. He looked at the Ritter Bann with a pang of conscience.

"It will be murder."

Dick retorted, "If I don't mind risking my neck, sir, you need not mind risking your horse."

Uncle Ned was a humane man, but he looked doubtful.

Dick added, "He jumps well; we have a chance. Beacon Hill will be the most dangerous. He ran third for the Two Thousand; but he is a slovenly fencer. Chameleon cannot stay the course. Anarchy and Trefoil are much fancied. Beacon Hill is first favourite; but Springle fancies our horse, and if you did not start him you might hurry on that fit of apoplexy which creeps towards his head every day after dinner. My riding your horse, sir, has put him up in the market; but even now you'll get fifty to one against him."

Mr. Vere looked admiringly at Dick's hatchet-shaped face. The cheek-bones seemed to be near to piercing through the tight-drawn skin. Dick was much altered since the days when his chubby cheeks were ruddy with early frosts. All the sweetness of youth and health had gone out from his expression. Truth was the only virtue left there, and it shone in the direct gaze of his blue eye. Two hectic spots burnt on his cheeks, and he coughed frequently; consumption had revenged itself on his overstrained constitution. Long fasts and an organized repression of his growth had made him an easy victim to an hereditary foe. The daisies were thick over Nancy Morris's grave for the same cause which made Dick's eyes so supernaturally large and bright. The lad was being trained to death; a circumstance of no importance in his employers' eyes, although they were much concerned whenever some high-priced two-year old broke down in the schooling which overtaxed its strength.

When the horses came out of the paddock, the crowd followed Beacon Hill's every movement with the admiration due to the representative of "their money."

He was the hero of the day. Male enthusiasts were delighted with his grand elastic movement, and declared him "fit to run for a man's life." Women paid homage to his deer-like head, and full large eye; the horse's head being to the fair sex the epitome of all his virtues or demerits.

No surging mass of spectators strove to get a view of

the Ritter Bann's toilette ; only one or two idlers peered behind the hedge where it was being quietly conducted, and these were growled away by Mr. Springle. "Don't come near him, or he won't be saddled in a week."

The brown horse was becoming clever in interpreting symptoms he did not approve. When they had raced him on the flat, they had never braided his mane as they did those of the other young ladies and gentlemen of Mr. Springle's establishment. He always took the hint to heart, and fretted himself into froth at the touch of those plaited loops about his neck.

The field started in good order. Edward Vere retreated to the stand, where the best view of the course could be obtained.

A woman's voice piped close by—

"Who will win the race, Mr. Vere?"

Mr. Vere looked wistfully at his horse's heels ; these were higher than they need have been when the flag was dropped. "But Springle says that he likes dirt," he muttered, by way of self-consolation.

The lady looked puzzled. She was not versed in the verbal peculiarities of turf classics. "An odd taste," she began. But Mr. Vere had removed himself from her vicinity. The struggle had begun, and he was fain to watch it in silence. The uproar of the crowd had subsided ; the beggars had ceased to whine, the brass bands to bray ; the mass of gay colours in the stand fluttered slightly. A great hush and a great calm had fallen on the groups ; only now and then a sudden cheer, or a nervous movement of opera-glasses, marked some new event in the race.

Gilbert Vere ranged himself by his brother's side ; silent and undemonstrative they watched the course. The jockeys, gay as a suite of court lords, kept together in tolerably compact order until the turn of the ridge and furrow came. Beacon Hill, getting off awkwardly, lost a little ground, but presently skimmed it like a bird, and with all the leading division succeeded in crossing the second fence with ease.

"You see, sir," the trainer said, as he panted up to Vere's side, "it is easier than it looks. Bless

you, sir, horses that are running don't suffer that faintish before-breakfast sort of feeling a man has in looking at a fence in cold blood."

"There's the Oxer coming now," Mr. Vere said, with a catch in his voice. "Ah, he's over safe!"

The Ritter Bann had cleared it with a mighty bound, his owner's heart jumping with him. Beacon Hill got well over, as did all the leading horses. Then came a blunder. Anarchy crossed another horse, which fell—one gay jacket vanished from the race; it was crumpled up on the ground. Some one picked him up, and replaced the jockey on his seat; but he rode weakly, and at the next fence could not prevent his horse from running into the ditch, and throwing him on to the fence.

"He's badly hurt," Mr. Springle said coolly; "and that horse is out of the race. So is Anarchy; he is standing like a mule before the next fence. Now comes the brook. Flop, splash;—two are in. Beacon Hill is over like a flash. The Ritter has half a mind to say no; but Dick humours him out of it. Over he goes. There's one running loose, with his man limp as a water-rat on the brink. There's the double post and rails. Over like a flight of pigeons—all but one. Our brown horse comes to it steadily. Will he do it? Oh, by Jove!"

"What—what is it?" Mr. Vere cried, rubbing his glasses frantically.

Dick had, as the trainer said, "come to it steadily;" but a handsome bay horse, wild with excitement, and swift with jealousy, cannoned against the Ritter Bann, and partially knocked his rider off.

No wonder the trainer gasped, and the owner's heart sickened. "It's all over now," they thought. But while their fear was still high, Dick, who had never lost his clutch of one stirrup, prompt as a lightning flash, swung himself back on his saddle, amidst an uproar of cheers.

"He never checked the pace," the trainer cried; "he's worth his weight in gold."

It was so workmanlike a feat, it stirred his sluggish nature into enthusiasm. It was a bold feat, and graceful in its quick rapidity, and it set women's handkerchiefs fluttering, and men's tongues ringing.

The excitement of the crowd now became more intense. Casualties had reduced the number of runners, and the field of heavy plough stopped two more, as though it were a dead wall. The favourite, however, showed no sign of distress, and the Ritter Bann kicked away the clods gaily. Uncle Ned's eye followed his colours with pride; he had never seen his horse so far forward in good company before.

"Wait until the effort begins," the trainer said; "if there's a race I fear he will stop."

The now disorderly group of horses struggled on; another fence came, one or two dwelt too long at it, and lost ground at the moment when every inch gained was a victory; another turned a somersault and lay on his jockey. The gay jacket had no flutter left about it, excepting what the breeze might make. No eye followed the little procession that moved away connected by a stiff ridge of gate lifted off its hinges; all faces were turned to the striving horses. "Beacon Hill wins, Beacon Hill walks in," they screamed.

Uncle Ned's heart failed him, and, in its failure, he recognised his own foolish hopes—how could he have thought his old brown horse could score a victory so late in the day; how could he ever have dreamt of seeing the Ritter Bann's name in the top line of honour, which would have chronicled him as being by Traitor out of Testy?

Folly, of course. The day dream was vanishing with each succeeding stride of Beacon Hill's legs; but at least the brown horse was near enough to be counted on as a good third—that was something. He could not be a mere "leather flapper," as the public contemptuously termed him, who ran third to Beacon Hill in the Moslem Steeplechase. But was Beacon Hill now going well within himself? Did he not blunder at crossing the fence out of the lane? Surely; and he no longer leads the sleek-sided quartette that are speeding up the hill. But the hill favours him, helping him on in advance once more; and again his supporters shout their faith and delight in his coming victory. Only one other fence remained to be jumped, that into the winning field.

Uncle Ned held his breath; the shouts of the crowd

seemed far away. There was a sea of upturned faces strained with anxiety; sharp exclamations leapt from it like flashes breaking the surface of a brooding ocean; cheering gave place to silence yet more expressive than sound. Beacon Hill had blundered seriously at his last fence, henceforth he would have to be ridden out if he was to beat his hitherto despised enemies. He struggled on gamely, he increased his advantage, and when near home was clear of all but one. Up went the riders' hands of those left behind, a frantic whirling of whips reduced the gap between them and Beacon Hill; but if the latter could but catch the leader's head the race would be safe for the favourite.

"Beacon Hill—Beacon Hill wins," again clamoured the crowd, when a stentorian contradiction arose from the Grand Stand! Will Uncle Ned ever forget that great—that supreme moment, when his trainer, waving his hat, shouted his psæan of triumph?

"Ritter Bann wins—Ritter Bann wins in a canter—Ritter Bann wins in a walk—Well done, Dick Morris!"

The ring men took up the cry in a high state of jubilee; they cheered the horse, but the people cheered Dick. They forgot, or put aside their own disappointment in their glee at his prowess. As the brown horse neared the winning-post Beacon Hill, in an agony of effort struggled within a length of him; in another moment the effort was fruitless, and the Ritter Bann and his rider were in a happy state of relaxation; Dick drooping over his saddle bow as if all his muscles had collapsed with the cessation of any necessity to exert them.

With his thin face paling and glowing, his eyes dim, and voice tremulous, Mr. Edward Vere walked by the heaving side of the winner, to hear the verdict of "All right" given by the high priest of the weighing scales.

"I can hardly believe it true," he whispered to his brother, who seemed less elated than he ought to have been.

"Why don't you congratulate me, Gilbert? you are not half lifted enough by our triumph."

"I'm sure I do congratulate you with all my heart," Gilbert Vere answered, with an effort to look pleasant. "It's very kind of you to call it 'our triumph,' and under



any other circumstances—could I have guessed, in fact, that your horse had the remotest chance, I should have taken care to have backed him; but you see——”

“Yes.” Uncle Ned spoke to his brother, but his eyes were following the Ritter Bann with a look which was in itself a canonization of the animal which had *liked dirt* to such good purpose.

“You see,” resumed Gilbert Vere, between the puffs of his cigar, “I felt quite sure that if any horse would be out of that race it would be yours, and so I betted heavily against him, and your good luck is my ruin.”





## CHAPTER XII.

### DICK RETURNS THANKS.

"'Tis but a piece of childhood thrown away."

"**I** WENT in for your horse, and I've won no end of money," Derrick Erle said grandly to the elder Vere. "I have asked Morris and a lot of other fellows to dine with me to-night at the Dragon. Pray come."

Mr. Vere looked at the boy with a half-amused, half-compassionate expression. "How did you find your way here? Did not your tutor object? Would your father approve——"

Mr. Erle pithily consigned his tutor to windy regions, and expressed his disregard of his father's approval. He added the unanswerable argument that "What the eye did not see the heart did not grieve;" in other words, his guardians did not know of his whereabouts.

He had quitted his tutor's that morning at daybreak; considerably leaving a note to say he should be back next day—for "Smyth is of a nervous temperament, and always drags all the ponds in the neighbourhood if a fellow is home late from church. Lucky I got here in time to put my money on."

"Unlucky, you mean," the other said, with more emphasis than was usual with him. "I can understand a poor devil who has no money running a tilt with chance;

but heirs of estates shouldn't be allowed to go at large in these places."

He accepted Derrick's invitation. He could do more good by keeping close to the lad, than by speeding back to town, dozing through the railway journey, and waking up with a start at every railway-station, where a voice in the dark shouted "Bankruptcy."

A noisy, if not a gay party, sat round Mr. Erle's table that night. Most of the faces wore a burnt-up look; only Derrick's showed as fresh as country daisy set 'twixt withered town ones. Edward Vere was the most subdued, because the most content. His brother, ordinarily a quiet man, was hilarious. A man's gaiety sometimes verges on mania, when a deep under-current of trouble gives intensity to his wit's sparkle. Vere's principal creditor, Mr. Walter Rolfe, was there. He considerably sat remote from his debtor. "I don't think Venus would look handsome to a fellow under the circumstances," he said, confidentially, to a mutual friend; "and I won't let my party face take the colour out of his wine."

Yet it did not occur to the speaker to offer any especial immunity for the obligations Mr. Vere had incurred. Walter Rolfe was a wealthy man. Such are often just, but seldom reckless, in their liberality.

The noise was at its height; the guests' dispositions were becoming affected by the alchemy of their potations; the acrimonious natures grew bland, and the amiable sulky; all, however, were equally roused to enthusiasm by a proposition from the host.

Derrick, with his handsome face slightly flushed, grasped the thin fingers of the lad who sat in the place of honour near him.

"Dick's health!" he cried; and the guests, blinking at Dick over sparkling eddies of champagne, cheered their assent. Mr. Springle's approbation took a self-complacent turn.

"I spared no pains with him," he murmured. A pithy summary of Dick's accomplishments followed.

"The quickest to get off. Such an economist of corners! and (highest test of jockeyship) knew when to leave a  
ue."

Dick rose to return thanks with a radiant face. When lounging with other stable lads on a truss of hay or straw you would have likened him to a sharp-eyed rat, so keen was his chin, so restless the expression. But now, with no shreds of the stable sticking to him, and with his fair skin brought into relief by his plain black clothes, his face showed some rare signs of race. The mouth was fine; the nostrils slightly dilated; his ear was small; and his throat well turned.

"A blood head," Gilbert Vere thought, "What a pity Sir George Erle did not train his own stock!"

Dick began his speech with the air of being on the rack common to English orators. He, however, warmed with his subject, as he declared that the Ritter Bann certainly wanted to be "let alone" harder than any horse he had ever ridden. He did not give himself overmuch credit for his powers of negation, but diverged into an eloquent panegyric on Mr. Springle. "He flogged my heels till he taught me not to stick them out; likewise my elbows, to keep 'em in. He kept me from fattening food, and he has got me light as a toy-terrier. I was a poor boy when I come to him. I belonged to nobody, and nobody cared if I were alive or dead. Now I belong to several gentlemen, who all get very uneasy if my finger aches. All that is Springle. I thank you for your kind words, gentlemen. I am proud to have won to-day. Perhaps I shall one day win a greater race, I look forward to that."

He paused, and Derrick cried, "Hallo, Dick! What ails you."

The speaker's breath came and went fast; an odd expression crossed his face. For a moment Derrick's attention was diverted by a waiter, who entered the room and whispered to him: "Sir George and Lady Dionysia Erle have arrived, and are inquiring for you, sir."

Derrick looked first scared, then angry. "Excuse me for an instant," he said to his guests; and, going outside the door, found the passage occupied by Lady Dionysia, her maid, and a large portmanteau.

A hasty and acrid colloquy ensued, in which Sir George joined.

"Blackguard pursuits! Undutiful son! Break my  
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heart! Don't imagine I mean to pay your debts!" Thus ran the duet.

Derrick answered with intense rigidity of manner, as befitted a man who felt that everything was slightly revolving.

"These are not blackguards. Women have no hearts. I have no debts. I must go back to my guests. Sir George, I can recommend the wine. Mother, I will wait on you in the morning."

His father shrugged his shoulders. "It is of no use arguing with him. He is drunk!"

"I don't think I am," Derrick said, with a commendable effort at self-analysis. "But if I am, I'm not a humbug."

"Derrick!" pleaded his mother.

"Little boys and dogs always know a humbug when they see one. When I was a little boy, I saw him sleep through the sermon, and heard him compliment the parson afterwards," Derrick muttered, as he beat a retreat towards the dining-room. Its door opened, the hubbub of voices had suddenly ceased, and, instead of a square table set about with jovial faces, the two in the passage caught sight of a group huddled about a prostrate form.

"A scene quite unfit for you to witness," Sir George said, drawing his wife aside. "Your son is nearly, and one of his friends seems quite, drunk."

"Let me stand before your Ladyship," the abigail said, with as laudable a care of Lady Dionysia's morals as though they were silk robes, and easily creased. The women retreated to a private sitting-room, while Sir George Erle walked out into the street, intending to keep an eye on the door of the hotel, lest Derrick should escape him. The duties of the heart were strangers to him. Prosperity and a narrow intelligence had indurated that organ, if he had ever possessed one; but society sometimes creates a very fair imitation of a good heart—something as correct and regular in its motions as a marionette. While society held Sir George responsible for his son, he meant to discharge his responsibilities to the best of his power. He paced the dimly-lighted street, taking counsel with himself as to the best mode of managing his refrac-

tory charge. His wife was sitting alone, within the hotel, but Sir George did not care to seek her society. A domineering temper and impetuous manner are sufficiently terrible to their victim in a large area; exercised in a small inn parlour they rouse all the vagrant in a man, and cause him to seek relief in desperate walks and soothing cigars. Sir George walked through the town until the houses grew sparse and the cottage-gardens longer; then turned, for the log of the married was on his foot, and his show of independence must end when the clock struck Lady Dionysia's retiring hour. As he came into the street, he saw its continuity of shadows suddenly broken by a flare of light from the inn door. A group of men, bearing something in their arms, came out from the porch. One was singing snatches of a comic song, interspersed with meditative pauses, in which he seemed to be making a drunken effort to recapture his memory. Him some one in the crowd pushed aside, then Derrick became visible in the gas light. He was kneeling by the side of the burden he had just now lowered to the ground. His face was pale and troubled, and the look he turned on his father had something of appeal in it.

Sir George drew himself up as the crowd pressed against him. "By your leave, gentlemen," he said stiffly. "One drunken man need not block the whole pavement."

"Drunk!" echoed Derrick, with a ring of pain in his voice. "Look at—look at his face, sir!"

The elder man looked down, and met Dick's eyes, looking not at him, but beyond him. The lad was lying with his chest bared, a thin line of blood welling over his under lip.

"Air!" he gasped. "Oh, Springle! I've got rolled over, and the horse is crushing me! Take him off! take him off!" He was silent again, yet drawing hard breaths, which were awful in their eloquence. The drunken fool stumbling on the pavement, the handsome youth by his head, the unknown father, who eyed him with a well-bred air of commiseration,—he was going away from them all. They knew it, though he did not; for a doctor present had said "nothing could be done;" and, knowing it, their voices were low, and their faces pale.

The boy, staring up at the stars, muttered that "it was a fine night for rabbiting."

Springle, with a dim idea that spiritual consolation was necessary, and much troubled at being only able to recall snatches of his catechism, broke in, with a voice which tried to be soft and was hoarse—

"Wouldn't you like to go up there, Dick?"

The boy shivered. "It looks cold," he whispered.

"Say a prayer, then. Can no one remember a prayer?"

All eyes were turned towards the well-dressed, middle-aged gentleman, whose coat and gold chain were warranties of social and religious worth. A more delicate soul would have preferred to deal with such a scene in the hush of privacy; a more exalted one would have risen to its height; Sir George, kneeling on his silk handkerchief to save his knees, raised his voice to that harsh, unnatural pitch with which it is the fashion of our second-class actors to interpret Shakespeare, and our preachers the Scriptures, and said a prayer for the dying.

Dick did not seem to heed; an ocean was surging between him and the speaker. The man in black, bending over him, was merely one of many shadows that were beginning to close about him.

"If you have anything to repent of, any sin to confess, speak while there is yet time!" urged Sir George. "A heartfelt prayer might win you a hope of heaven yet."

"I don't think he knows any reg'lar prayer," interposed the trainer, snivelling. "Can you say any good words, Dick? Perhaps if the gentleman here were to give you a lead!"

"I—I always rode on the square," gasped Dick, looking bewildered. "Is that what you're asking me about, governor? That's all I have to say."

Sir George looked reproachfully at the bystanders.

"Are all these lads brought up as heathens?" he asked.

"I don't believe the boy has ever been to a church."

"He had no father," Edward Vere said gently. "But you hear what he said. It was as good as a collect. Depend upon it, Erle, a man's life will be counted as his rue death-prayer."

"Derrick," said his father, "we have done what we can. Will you not come away with me now?"

Derrick clasped the dying boy's thin fingers more closely.

"I shan't leave him," he said briefly. Then moaned, "Oh, Dick—dear Dick, if I could but think of something to comfort you! I think you'll be sure to go to the right place, Dick. You've been such a good little chap. Do you remember how, when the ring-men tried to get at you, you wanted to knock one of 'em down, only couldn't, being so small?"

But Dick was all unconscious of his friend's passion of grief, and was every instant further removed from this strange scene. When the gas began to flare palely, being at odds with the dawn, some of the loungers, weary of giving sympathy which implied personal fatigue, slunk off to their beds. A dog belonging to the inn came out of his kennel, and entered a growling protest against the disturbers of his rest; but, seeing his owner near by, modified his objections, stretched, shivered, and crept back to his straw. The innkeeper did not dare to sleep—so anxious was he to prevent Dick's re-entering his house. He understood human nature, and, above all, his customers' nature, and knew that the living regard the dead with the aversion of mortal enemies.

"Erle," said Edward Vere softly, as the former turned to quit the scene, "look at that boy's face; and when you go into your room, look in your glass."

"What do you mean?"

"What humbug people talk about parental instinct," pursued Mr. Vere reflectively. "I don't pretend to be sentimental, Erle, but if I were you I should shake hands with that lad before he goes away for ever." Then stooping near to his companion Mr. Vere whispered the rest of his speech.

Sir George's face then reddened, then paled. "You mistake," he faltered; "it is all a mistake, Vere;" but his limbs shook, and he had to lean on Edward Vere's arm, as the latter led him towards the sick lad. Dick was fighting with his hands and repeating his husky cry for air, and for an instant his expression and gesture seemed menacing. The bystanders wondered to see how the bu



gentleman fell back before an involuntary thrust from those puny hands. "It is too late," Sir George muttered, and moved hastily away. He was seized with such a terrible sickness of body and soul, he was fain to crave for Mr. Vere's arm once more.

"I am sorry for you," the latter said gently, as he bade him farewell. "You'll sleep badly for some nights to come, I'm afraid. Hark what the lad is saying."

"*The rooks are up early and away this spring. Look at the old fellows teaching the young ones to fly.* How thick they are! I can't see for them. Springle, it's hard work to get this horse along. A lazy brute; he makes my sides sore to ride him, and my breath catch. That is because the pace is too good—too good; no horse could live long through it." He ceased for an instant, then looked about him with a troubled expression.

"What do you want?" cried Derrick. "He is trying to speak; he wants to call some one."

With a painful effort Dick lifted himself on his elbows. "Gyp," he cried, "Gyp," then sank back with a deep sigh.

"Who was he calling? who was Gyp?" the bystanders asked each other, mystified.

Sir George Erle looked anxiously at Edward Vere.

"He wasn't calling for me?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, dear, no," Mr. Vere said drily. "I believe Gyp was the name of a terrier bitch he used to have at Vere Court. How does he seem, Derrick?"

Derrick made no answer; his head was bowed over the little face on which was now the wonder of wonders.





## CHAPTER XIII.

### NEST CASTS HER NET.

**I**N joy we may forget whom it is we love; in sorrow their memory is clear as the one star in a black sky. Through all the tempest and shock of his grief Derrick's lips were privately forming the two syllables "Nella." He came back to her pale and sorrowful. She had built up a snow wall of cold reserve, behind which to greet him. According to her fantasy, she was an injured queen bound to resent the encroachments of a neighbouring monarch. Had the enemy come with blare of trumpets and arrogant mien; she would have fought out the quarrel to the end; but when he crept as a beggar to the gates, humbled and sad-eyed, the queen flung down her weapons, and the woman ran to comfort him. Harmony was re-established between them. Willie Smyth was sent to Coventry, being the hapless sacrifice on the altar of their reconciliation.

It was at this time that Mrs. Alymer bethought herself of asking Derrick to come and fish at the Limes. She gave the invitation herself with winning cordiality, her little hand resting the while like a puff of swan's-down in the lad's strong fingers. Of course he said yes. Nella looked grave when she heard. She could not gauge Nest's character; but there are some dangers of which instinct warns us—poisoned berries of which even fledglings know the peril.

The next morning Nest, from her dressing-room, saw

tall Derrick bending over the lake's brink, rod in hand. She smiled as she drank her early cup of coffee; nevertheless she did not hurry her preparations. She liked to linger over her toilette; always a subject of deep consideration to her. She was a true artist, and delighted in harmony; hence, if she meant to be dignified and scornful, she assumed a train; for, as she argued, a small woman in a short skirt and pannier has a bob of the sparrow about her. If she intended to be gay and sprightly, she affected fluttering ribbons, buckled shoes, and gossamer petticoats that looked as if they had been caught by the wind in some mysterious way and tied by its breaths; for sentiment, a dove-coloured robe, with something of the dressing gown in its languor was appropriate.

She looked placidly at Derrick in the mist, and stretched her feet nearer to the fire. He can stay there until lunch time, she thought. "That is the advantage of boys, they are so hardy, their enthusiasm and unimpaired constitutions make them indifferent to discomfort; when the heart's hot it feels neither frost nor rain. Now I shouldn't dare allow a man of more mature age to find out that he had wetted his boots or exposed himself to an easterly wind for my sake." She decided to put on the dove-coloured robe to-day. Derrick was young enough to be fascinated by sentiment, whereas an older man would be tired of it. When dressed she gave herself up to her household duties. There were orders to give and complaints to hear. The housekeeper, old and forgetful of her youth, complained that a pretty housemaid behaved very unbecomingly. She had been seen to be kissed by one of the grooms.

Nest admonished the culprit: "Do not do it again."

"Please, ma'am, I didn't do it. He did, and I couldn't help it."

"Women can always help it," Mrs. Alymer said drily.

"At any rate, Mary, don't be *seen* doing it again."

Saying which, Mrs. Alymer went her way, to play the agreeable with her husband.

She asked, with real interest, what his plans were for day, and when she found they were fixed, and that

his intention was to ride to a distant farm—a proceeding which would necessarily keep him out some hours—she ventured to press him gently to stay at home, and failed as she intended.

“I’m afraid you’ll be dull, my dear. Why don’t you ask Miss Vere to spend the afternoon with you?”

Nest made a *mouse* of aversion.

“I object to her,” she said; and, indeed, Nest had a chronic objection to young and pretty girls. “I shall not be dull,” she further declared; “only tell me what time you are likely to be home, dear, and then I shall know when to watch for you.”

“About five,” he said, pleased; and Nest kept up her character for wifely tenderness by watching him from the door, and looking an adieu after him so long as he was visible. Then she retreated to her boudoir, sat down, and drawing up a couch to the fire, placed herself in such a position as to blend the comfort of warm feet with an attitude of pensive dejection.

She rang a bell, and in a quick, business-like voice, which contrasted oddly with her general appearance, commanded that Mr. Erle should be offered luncheon, and after luncheon he was to be informed of her willingness to receive him.

By-and-by Derrick came in, fresh-faced and light-hearted.

“Only think, Mrs. Alymer, I’ve caught some beauties!”—pointing to a basket carried by the footman, out of which sundry silver tails and gaping heads protruded.

“Take them away,” Nest said to the servant. She did not like to see dead things. “I wonder in what the pleasure consists,” she added, looking curiously at Derrick, “in standing motionless by a foggy river-brink, or in fishing for them, or in feeling the hook crawl into their mouths?”

“I don’t know,” Derrick said simply. He had all his sex’s common dislike of theories. In truth, Nest was better fitted than himself to answer such a question. She, too, had her piscatory tastes.

She drew the youth on to talk about himself, his friends, his home, and his favourite pursuits. It bored her a good

deal, but it was part of her system ; so she submitted. At last she dexterously turned the conversation to herself—her own youth, her early marriage, the many lonely hours she spent, and how she was generally misunderstood and unappreciated. She laughed a little to herself as she put forth this plea for his interest. She had met with so many married people who, by their own accounts, were sufferers from the same complaint. "Not appreciated !" she would cry with scorn. "Do these vain fools really believe their mistresses or their lovers would put up with half of what time and necessity inure their legitimate spouses to ?"

She had another theory, which was, that the woman did not exist who was incapable of a flirtation. She had sought a specimen with the diligence of a naturalist craving to name a new life, but hitherto without success.

"I was married very young," Nest murmured, with a sigh, which stirred her shapely bust.

"So I should say," and Derrick looked at the round chin, which had a dimple so deep you might have thought a bird had pecked it, mistaking it for fruit.

"Before I knew my own mind," pursued Nest.

"That was rather rash, wasn't it ?" suggested Derrick.

"Before I knew what love was," with more energy, and a blue-lightning flash from between her eyelashes.

Derrick was silent, and looked shy ; his heart was suddenly filled with the memory of his own love—and in youth eye-reverence goes with lip-passion.

"Nothing to which to look forward," Nest muttered, wearily looking out on the autumn landscape, as though it personified her condition.

"Don't say that. Think of the hunting. The country will soon be clear again," said cheery Derrick, with a critical eye on the bronzed hedgerows.

"It is all very well for you."

Derrick looked at her in amaze. The sleepy invalid seemed turned to a flame, a possessed witch. She stood up, her eyes flashed, she bit blood on to her full under lip. Practice had made this attitude very effective.

"A man has always action in which to vent his discontent. If he is bored or goaded at home, he can live

another life outside his home existence, run off his irritation with his pen, or strain his arms in reaching at the various moons for which men-babes cry. At least he grows fatigued enough to sleep and forget."

"What can you want to forget?" the lad said wonderingly. "A surfeit of pleasure!"

"You do not understand," Nest said moodily. "Perhaps it is well you should not." She crouched down on a low settee by the fire; and looked into the land behind the grate, and murmured, "No one will ever know what I suffer."

A sudden light broke on Derrick. "I wonder if Alymer ever gets drunk, and beats her—the brute!" His chivalrous fist clenched at the bare idea.

"But why should I weary you with my miseries," Nest said, with an apparent effort at cheerfulness, gently caressing, the while, a snowy wrist, on which a blue dent was visible.

"She certainly means that," Derrick thought, with hot face and rising wrath. "How did you get that scar?" he cried, with his boyish voice deep with anger.

Had Nest spoken truly, she would have answered, "That was caused by that idiot, Walter Rolfe, clasping my bracelet so awkwardly the last time we were in the conservatory together;" but truth was Nest's exception. She looked down and sighed. "Don't ask me," she said in a plaintive little voice.

"What a d——, I beg your pardon, Mrs. Alymer, but what an unmanly brute he must be!"

"Walter Rolfe?" said Nest, inadvertently, surprised by his energy of face and tone.

"Your husband!" he went on, not noticing her interpolation. "I really don't feel as if I could ever shake hands with him again."

"My husband? There isn't a man worthy of touching his hand!" cried Mrs. Alymer, in a fury. "He is the best, gentlest, and kindest old darling that ever lived."

"I am very sorry. I—I misunderstood," stammered Derrick, abashed. "Will you forgive me, Mrs. Alymer?" He held out his hand, meaning to combine his adieu and his apology, but Nest chose to assume that the latter only

was intended. He could not drop the pretty fingers she made no motion to withdraw.

"I have no fault to find with Ben," she said, resuming her tone of sentiment. "It is no demerit of his that he cannot be the hero of my dreams. He is very kind, but——" She paused, and a tearful melancholy clouded her eyes. Derrick gave the fingers a little squeeze. She dropped his hand gently.

"I shall remember to-day," she murmured, with a dreamy look through the window at the woodland thick with rain. "I like autumn, and I adore the country. You are fond of the country, I think?"

Derrick pondered. He liked the Vere woods yonder, with their fresh scent of where the axe had bruised them. Then he remembered the pale, felled trees, that struck athwart the underwood. There was a grim old pond, that lurked in the shadows. He liked these things because his heart had fluttered there at the step of the girl he loved. He moved his hand involuntarily. "Oh, to hold you dear," he thought, and the thought was not for Nest.

"I am fond of——" he began stammering. Nest gave him a look eloquent with encouragement, when the door opened, and Mr. Rolfe was announced.

Nest met him with a demonstrative greeting, which he returned with a glance half amused, half reproachful, as he noted her companion. Derrick, shortly after, took his departure, looking a little injured, as the most simple-minded youth might do at the effusive welcome given to a new comer, but consoled by the weight of his fishing-basket.

"I shall see you to-morrow, at church," Nest said meaningly; then returned to her cousin. "It is so dull in the country, Walter," she pleaded apologetically.





## CHAPTER XIV.

### FALSE FIRES.

**T**HE service in Vere church was over. The slumberers during the sermon had awakened to the sound of the Benediction. The clergyman rustled away a robin, which had made a perch of a crusader's finger. Presently the churchyard was bright with the movement and colour of life. Very few looked at the yesterdays diaried by the little green mounds which surrounded them. Some few of the elders discussed the sermon—the middle-aged women were rapt in the contemplation of Mrs. Alymer's toilette.

The murmurs blended oddly at times. One old granny shouted out a repetition of the text to her deaf friend—"For eye hath no seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive——"

"Such lovely Mechlin lace. What sums she must cost her husband!"

For a brief instant two young faces came together, and glowed under the deep flame of the beech leaves.

"There's a letter in the hollow of the cherry-tree, but look out for snakes," whispered Derrick, and he passed on, with an air of indifference which did not in the least deceive Mrs. Aylmer, who was rustling behind him.

"He is really too handsome for such a chit. It would be a charity to his mother to interfere. I must ask him and his tutor to dinner," Nest thought, and her homeward meditations were fraught with mischief.



Nella tripped away gay-eyed, and feeling as if the song of the robin was still trilling in her ears, setting the sermon to music. She made her father's tea with a radiant face. The meal was a scanty one—especially her portion of it; but that did not fret her.

Her head was outrunning her feet on the path to the cherry-tree, which she would seek as soon as her father was settled for the evening.

To her dismay, he challenged her to a game of chess. For more than an hour she had to feign patience and attention to the board, furtively eyeing the night growing dim outside the window. The shadows thickened, until the holly against the pane looked like the sharp black sketch of a holly bush. The latest bird gave its latest tweet, and dived into its laurel palace.

"Check to your king."

"Yes, papa." ("If I moved my chair I could almost see the cherry-tree.")

"That was a bad move, my child."

"I fear it is." ("I wonder what he says.")

"It is a strict game, Nella."

"Is it? Oh, I beg your pardon." ("How sweet his face was when his eyes met mine; and how nice and cross he got when Willie had one of my books!")

"You can't move there."

"No; of course not. How stupid of me!" ("Oh, to be that deer walking towards the wood.")

There were long pauses. The elder player, glad to forget himself and put his thoughts into mathematical order, gave his whole attention to the sedatest of games. The girl's effort to concentrate her interest on the board was marred by sweet stray memories and nervous impatience. For him the hour was one of pensive calculation; pleasantly still, inasmuch as the greenfinch was asleep, and the fire burnt low: there was no tremor of light or shade; for the time, he rested—and after thirty the element of rest must be counted as one of man's luxuries. Gilbert Vere was at an age when the ache for comfort replaced the crave for pleasure. Presently he would drink his brandy-and water, smoke a cigar—until, getting all failure in cloudland, he would drop off

to sleep, resolutely closing his mental vision against those poignant little half lights of memory, which are apt to flash on us painfully in the twilight of thought which is neither sleep nor vigil.

It was late when Nella stood on the stone steps of the porch, taking, as she said, a good-night of the stars.

The hypocrite—there was but one star for her in the sky, and it shone over a cherry-tree.

"You'll catch a cold, Miss Nella," grumbled Martha, shivering, as she crossed the passage.

"When you are my age, Nella," Mr. Vere said softly, from his realms of cigar-smoke in his sitting-room, "you'll know that moonlight should be only taken in infinitesimal doses at Richmond—after dinner."

Both complainants heard the front door close, and nodded approval. "Good girl, she has gone to bed," they thought. At any rate, the unpleasant draught of air was barred out. Mr. Vere smoked his thoughts into chaos, sipped his brandy, and felt that existence was a pleasant blur.

Meanwhile, Nella's shadow swept fleetly over the moonlit turf.

Who would not be seventeen again, to feel heaven-lifted by such sweet folly? With her feet wet from occasional plunges into spongy moss, with low-growing wood-leaves splashing her face, Nella ran to her goal, her face radiant with that healthy bloom which belongs to unfaded vernal life. No petty care had ever fretted the smooth brow. Some women's faces show like the maps of an oft traversed country—pleasure has been one route, and wasted the wealth of the eyes; pain has been another, and uprooted the dimple, and pulled the mouth awry. This girl's face was an island of untilled delights—of half-dawning glories.

Derrick's letter was written in pencil, and the handwriting, boy fashion, ran like sensitive oats in a tray—all towards the corners.

"MY DARLING—

"I thought you looked cross at me to-day. I wish you wouldn't—when I love you so. I hate you when you

read out of Willie Smyth's prayer-book. I should like to choke him with it for his impudence. I can't work. I only punch other fellows' heads; and have bitten off the ends of all old Smyth's pens—just because I love you so much. I think I shall walk out this evening, and be at the cherry-tree at nine o'clock. I wonder if some one will be thinking of me about that time—or better still, be looking at me.—Your

“D. E.

“P.S. If you don't come, I think I shall go to Australia.”

As she stood now, reading her lover's letter in the cross-bars of moonlight, each pleasant word showing on her face like glows of sunshine, she was twice as fair as Nest Alymer. An artist or a man of the world would have appreciated the reality and freshness of her charms, and condoned the common material of her dress, and the honesty of her manners; women and boys might prefer Nest's faultless attire and trained graces. It is to be seen how one boy in particular was affected by them.

While Nella was trampling down cross-bars of brambles to get her letter, Derrick was sitting at Mr. Alymer's dining-table, drinking excellent Burgundy, and coming rapidly to the conclusion that his host was “a very good fellow.” Loudly-expressed admiration of the husband is not unfrequently the initiatory to privately-felt devotion to the wife; but at present Derrick was guileless in his appreciation of Mr. Alymer's good qualities and good wine.

Walter Rolfe did not drink anything warmer-coloured than water. He kept his eyes studiously averted from the decanters, and talked fluently to his companions on various topics.

“You do not drink,” suggested Derrick, insinuating a bottle towards his companion.

“It's the devil's claw,” said Mr. Rolfe softly, still keeping his eyes averted. “I want to get free of it. Let us go. Eh, Alymer?”

Alymer nodded assent, and the trio went on to the terrace smoke cigarettes,

A face peeped from the conservatory door. It was as though one of the lovely tropic blossoms flushed out into the night.

"Mr. Erle," gurgled Nest (Nest's voice was more pliable than her nose, and could be tuned to any phase of romance), "leave them an instant, and come and console me in my solitude;" and Derrick entered into the warm, rich-scented atmosphere.

The greenhouse communicated with the drawing-room. Through the door yonder he saw the flame of the fire on the satin damask curtains within. The cold splash of a distant fountain in the garden lost its chill heard in this dusky warmth.

The boy's heart beat fast. He felt the charm of the scene more than he himself was aware of. The man who has trained his senses through long years of self-study can gauge to preciseness even transient and subtle delights. The young cannot fathom those vague ecstasies. An echo from an old world speaks in a thrill on a westerly breeze; some message from heaven passes with a film of cloud or a flower's breath. These are hints of the soul. But the older votaries of the world are apt to train their souls even to extinction. Derrick's heart throbbed, and he thought it was for Nella. A woman's white shoulder was brushing his own as the pair paced the conservatory; a woman's soft arm curled about his. It was all charming—the half light, the subtle odour of the daphnis-blossom, one of which was fastened into and pervaded Nest's glossy tresses. He drew a deep breath for love's sake, and shivered at the contact when Nest floated nearer to him, soft and caressive as a summer wave coquetting with shingle drift. One older and more experienced would have simply argued, "Here is a pretty woman—not too genuine either in beauty or disposition, but pleasant enough to sweeten the hour into a very good imitation of happiness; and this is a chance to be improved, not neglected."

Probably Mrs. Alymer would not have given such a chance to any one likely to use it. She could gauge Derrick's inexperience to a nicety. There was one point on which she misunderstood him. She did not realize how healthy a man's moral nature may become under the

influence of a strong passion for some one woman. Derrick was not obtuse. He was enthralled just as much as she intended by every allurements of light, sound, and touch. But he did not think of her. His eyes, tender and shining, looked into hers, but saw those of Nella.

"I wish she were here," he muttered half aloud.

"What would you do with me?" Nest asked quickly, overhearing him. Then she tore away her arm petulantly, and went out sulking to the terrace.

Derrick followed, amazed at her gesture and wrath.

"Have I offended you, Mrs. Alymer?" he asked meekly.

"Why did I ever meddle with pap; it's very insipid," Nest thought, stifling a yawn. Aloud, she muttered, with vehemence, "If you want some one else's society, of course you can't want mine."

These commonplace words were uttered with the air of a furious child. She wanted to break down the fence which courtesy and his own innate chivalry built between him and his hostess. Her voice and manner dispelled the day-dream. It was quite clear to Derrick now that this was not Nella, but something antagonistic and dangerous to his absent love.

"She wants me to spoon her, for some reason or other," was his mental exclamation; "but I won't." Coming a few steps nearer to her, he added, "At least only a very little."

"Good-night," faltered Nest, sticking out a rosy finger tip, her eyes were large with reproach, and Derrick lingered.

"Good-night," he said softly; "I wish I hadn't offended you."

"I'm not offended," snapped Nest, "only mortified." Then she buried her head in her arms. A sigh stirred the ribbon that floated about her neck, and she muttered something about being "unhappy."

"I hope this will end soon," she thought, "my coffee is getting cold, so are my feet. England wasn't made for *al fresco* flirtations."

She lifted up her face. "Forgive me, Mr. Erle," she said, with cold politeness; "I was very foolish and

unreasonable to be irritated by a discourtesy which I am sure you did not intend."

"Discourtesy!" he echoed, looking perplexed.

"Of course; to wish for another woman's presence was an insult to me. I should not have objected to your *thinking* of her. I rather like my admirers to remember their old loves in my eyes. It fuses harmoniously all the past and present ecstasies," added this epicure of emotion.

She spoke abstractedly, but her eyes pleaded for his homage, and her baby face was dimpling in perilous neighbourhood to his.

"You will forgive me my petulance," she said, putting her hand lightly on his wrist; "after all, it is a great compliment to you. No woman is ever reasonable or sweet-tempered excepting when she is indifferent; to be jealous is to——" She paused, astonished, scared, and angry in real earnest. She had meant him to be overcome by respectful adoration; she expected him to stammer something, perhaps even to clasp her hands with a tremble in his own, and to go away all awkwardness and devotion, dream of her that night, and perhaps write her an incoherent *billet doux* in the morning; but those white arms flashing nearer to him in the darkness as she bade him good-night, were the torches to a train of gunpowder. His own arm held her as in a vice. The boy turned tyrant, clasped her as ruthlessly as though she were a bird. What did he care for her angry pecks at him with her little hands? To feel the beating of her heart through its laces and gauds gave them a new charm.

"I don't care; I don't care," he stammered. "Ill-mannered, insolent, and brute, am I? granted. Fool, did you say? Not that. You thought I was one, or else you wouldn't have played me as if I'd been a stupid fish. Well, I like my bait—so well, I don't know how to part with it. Hark! what's that?"

From beyond the dark haze of the Vere Woods came the clear vibration of the church-bell. It struck nine, and Derrick knew that Nella awaited him now at their usual trysting place. He released Nest almost as suddenly as he had clasped her. He was stung by a keen pang of

self-reproach. A swift insult from his own conscience vexed him even to sickness.

"I am ashamed," he muttered; "bitterly ashamed. Can you pardon me? I was mad; but I will not stay now to entreat your pardon, the sight of me must be horrible to you. I fear you will never forgive me."

He vaulted over the balustrade and was gone ere she had time to speak. She tried to delay him by a gesture of her hand, a dangerous condonation of his offence, which he did not perceive, for he never looked back. The true heart was waiting for him in the thicket yonder. As he ran swiftly through copse and field on his way to Nella, he was haunted by the wicked light of Nest's eyes and the glimmer of the white flower in her hair, and vaguely associated them with the fable of those malign lights which coax travellers into pit-falls.

Nest coolly readjusted her ribbons, stroked the fluffy wave of hair into its usual position, and went back to her coffee.

"Never forgive him!" she mused. "When he grows older he will discover that a woman can forgive anything but neglect—that insult is unattonable."

Mr. Rolfe looked at her curiously while she made Derrick's excuses to her husband.

"He was suffering frightfully from neuralgia," invented Nest, "so I insisted on his going home without waiting to bid you good night."

Walter Rolfe whispered with the impertinence excusable in a kinsman and an old and tolerated admirer,—

"It's a bad sign with a boy when he can't meet the husband's eye. With men of the world, it is excess of friendship which should breed suspicion."

"It shows how the elder men exceed the younger ones in hypocrisy," retorted Nest.

"It's a question of time," he answered drily. "Nearly all our passions are at war, or liable to be so, with the moral bridges we make for ourselves. In fair weather we float under smoothly enough. In rough times we enlarge our margin: it is then merely a question of aptitude in deceiving the public eye as to the extent of our divergence. What are you going to do with this boy, Nest?"

"His mother is a great friend of mine."

"That means foe, to whom you are temporarily linked by some bond of iniquity. Good."

"He is in love with a portionless girl of no particular station. He is heir to a fine property. His mother is miserable lest he should fall a victim to these designing people."

"Is the young lady pretty?"

"Hum—so, so. Might be, if she were decently dressed," Nest admitted unwillingly.

"So like women," murmured Mr. Rolfe. "To imagine that a man's admiration of them is dependent on the dressmaker, when one's chief effort is directed at guessing the grace of nature's handiwork minus flounces and bows." He added aloud, "Is she a good girl?"

"As girls go. I have never heard of her being tempted."

"Is she fond of him?"

"How can I tell?"

"By your own feeling. Were you ever very fond of any one?"

"I have been very fond of a great number of people," Nest said candidly.

"That quite accounts for your being unable to gauge the extent of this girl's love—she who has only loved one. Is she intelligent?"

"All women are intelligent enough to tell fibs and intrigue," yawned Mrs. Alymer. "Why do you take an interest in her?"

"I take an interest in him. He is a nice lad. I should be glad to think that his future would be bright. Take my advice, my dear. Leave these two alone—let them come together. He has wealth enough for both; and at least, ere he die, he will be able to say, 'I have been happy once.' There are few enough who can say that. The loss of a girl sent me to the devil, or to the brandy bottle—it's much the same. Besides, Nest, you know you are only licensed to flirt on the premises—that is, with me."

"I'll think it over," Nest said lazily; "but it goes against the grain with me to allow any eligible man to throw himself away on any one but myself."



"What is he to reap from an attachment to you? You are not earnest even in your wickedness. Nest, Nest! surely you might find better work for your pretty fingers than manufacturing dust to throw in men's eyes."

"Walter, Walter!" mocked Nest, "surely you know that man's happiness is in being blinded; and when I grant him hope, I am giving him life's sweetest gift."

"An illusion which ends in frustration."

"That's a better word than *ennui* to end a love tale in. It at least leaves something which is regretted and remembered."





## CHAPTER XV.

### GATHER YE ROSEBUDS.

**T**WO young faces were bending over the sun-dial in the kitchen garden at Vere, pretending to read the hour by a broken index. The autumn was growing old, and its golden death-tint burnished all the fringe of the Vere woods.

The girl, with hands closing about a dimpled chin, took in with her down-glance the new aspect of a familiar scene. The dim blaze of the gravel path, showing flame-like between cool ridges of sea-green box; the level apple-trees interlacing their grey arms in staunch friendship; the lazy coo of the wood-pigeons in the wood that peeped over the walls—she had noted all these charms before, but with dispassionate admiration. Now these golden paths seemed to have the sun of Paradise upon them, and this was one of those best moments in which earth's children seem to strive to trace their way to the happy garden of Eld. "This," she thought, "is my hereafter. I have heard his voice in twilight winds; I have watched for his face down strange roads. What more can I now listen or watch for?" But she did not give her joy voice.

The two were dull, stupid, and happy. They talked sometimes, but were more often silent—such as when they touched each other's hands by chance, and remembered how much they loved one another.

Man-like Derrick was the most restless.

"Let us go to the wood at the back of the garden," he said.

A sheeny belt of water and a small fence bounded the woodland from a lane which was a short cut to the Limes. Nella hung back.

"Supposing any one should pass that way," she suggested. "You like my hair to be down about my shoulders, and you have a fancy for this battered straw hat, because you saw me first in it; but it doesn't look tidy."

"Who will see us? No one but the weed-pickers in the field yonder. Do come, dear. I do so want to throw stones into the clear stream."

"What a boy you are still!" reproved his companion. "Oh, there are some medlars under that tree, let us fill a cabbage leaf with them first."

Then ensued a generous contest as to which should eat the best. Woman-like, Nella was anxious to minister to her idol's gratification; man-like, he refused her sacrifices in theory and accepted them in practice.

"It seems funny," Nella said smilingly, "not to want to have the best oneself. When we were children, my brothers and I would try sometimes and be unselfish to each other, but we never liked it in our hearts. Max was always just; Gilbert sometimes would take everything, and get dreadfully penitent when it was too late; Dora used to read the Bible very hard, and look out of the corner of her eye at a delicacy."

"And you?"

Nella looked ashamed. The heroines of romance were ever high-minded and disdainful of material luxuries, but she liked Derrick too well to equivocate to him even in trifles.

"I was neither just nor penitent," she sighed.

They passed into the woodland presently, taking trouble with their footsteps to innumerable birds.

"They want thinning," Derrick said, looking up with a critical eye at a storm of rocks.

"You are always wishing to kill something," the girl said vexedly.

Derrick looked tender and superior. "The law of nature," he suggested.

"Then I'm at war with the law of nature. Either I am a mistake or the creed to prey is one. If it is right to destroy that marvel called life, which no earthly hand may construct, why do I feel so repugnant to such destruction?"

"Humanity is the pernicious effect of civilisation, dear," her lover said drily. "It has made you humane. In a savage state you would have become accustomed to nature's ingenuities of suicide. She is like the child who dresses a doll that she may have the pleasure of pulling it to pieces again."

"Yes," the girl said sadly; "it all ends with the same harsh word. Listen! There it is, Derrick, sounding now." From a sleepy-looking hamlet, set deep in red leaves and its own still smoke, came the sound of a church bell. Nella clung closer to her lover. "I should like to live always," she whispered. The boy looked back a response. At twenty, on a sunny day and with a lovely loving face touching his shoulder, who would not give his "ay" for immortality. "Unless," she added—the bell sending another chill to her thoughts—"we were parted."

Again they were silent. The wood birds piped short songs about summer and love; the doves said, "We are two-oo, we are two." The bell tolled on, but both had forgotten it in the touch of the other's lips.

"Dear," murmured Derrick, "I do not understand why Alexander believed himself immortal until he remembered his love for Thais—my faith is at its best when I am near you. As for that bell, it shall ring for our wedding one day."

Then the girl flushed with a quick, happy glow—then sighed.

"Your mother will hate it."

"She must learn to love it, as the bottle-imp said. My idea is, to accustom her to the notion; bring her up to the fence quietly, you know, pat her head a bit, and soothe her over it before she knows what one is about."

"I think," said Nella astutely, "that your mother will probably know what you are about directly she looks at your face. At least if you look as happy as—as I have

done since we have known each other. Don't do that, Derrick, the stone-picker will see you."

The stone-picker, an old woman of sixty odd years, was bent nearly double over her toil, and had as little thought of their fresh rose faces as she had of the lark that was carrying song far up into silence above her head.

"A most melancholy occupation that," Derrick said; "it could never create a poet."

"I don't know," the girl answered dreamily. "A stone embedded in grasses and played on by lithe shadows has its grace. Then they make mirth in the stream. She can hear the waters curtsying to them all down the wood range."

"You are crediting her with refined instincts. These are subtleties of education."

"There are subtleties which education cannot give. Now tell me, Derrick, how do you look when you hear good music?"

"Bored to death, I daresay."

"Exactly. Well, there is an old labourer who passes my window every Sunday afternoon by a short cut which leads from church to his cottage. He is rather deaf, and has the wistful expression common to deaf people. He is clumsy, dirty, and intensely provincial in tone; but there is the light of another life in his eyes when my music floats into the lonely fields and gives a soul to the twilight."

"Nella, I love you!"

"What has that to do with music?"

"Nothing. To-day is a day of beautiful nothings. How can I help talking at random when I am perpetually interrupted by a peep under your eyelashes and the necessity of touching your sleeve?"

"Derrick, let us play at choosing heroes."

"Certainly, if we may choose them for what they might have been. Jack Sheppard is my hero, because he would have made a high-class general. He combined the highest strategic and executive qualities. As prompt as bold, he died at three-and-twenty a victim to his irrepressible activity, a sad example of wasted power. What a magnificent soldier he would have made! Nella, your hair is

the colour of those dead leaves with the sun on them. I wish my mother could see you; she would think you beautiful. I have told her that you are so. Dear, I am afraid sometimes when I am separate from you: the fear of loss. My mother is coming to stay at the Limes. As soon as she has seen you, I shall be able to speak to her with good heart. She will sympathise with me then. Your hair shall be braided neatly; my mother has a great love of order, and of course, as she wouldn't want to pull your hair, she wouldn't see the beauty of my favourite style; and your dress must be a pretty one, eh, Nella! I don't understand fashions in dress; but you have plenty, I daresay. For garden wear alone with me, there is nothing more charming than that cool blue cotton."

Nella looked blank. How little rich people understood the manifold impossibilities of poverty! she thought. Even her lover, whose whole life was one long thought for her, did not see that blue cotton was the richest material she could afford, and this one cost two shillings to wash. She looked half resentfully at Derrick. She felt injured by his ignorance of the efforts she had made to obtain those two shillings.

"Our hens are very wild," she observed pensively, "they conceal their eggs in the most uncomfortable nooks they can find. They seem to divine that nettles are not in sympathy with human legs, and that brambles are destructive to petticoats. I had great difficulty in collecting my last two shillings' worth of eggs."

"Do you blow them and string them?" said unconscious Derrick. "I know lots of young ladies who paint on chains of them."

"I can afford nothing more expensive than chains of daisies," Nella said gaily. "String me one, Derrick."

She laughed at the effort his strong hands made to be deft and gentle, then bent her round throat to receive the fragile adornment. A narrow ray of sun struck a common glory on their heads. Perhaps their eyes were dazzled; perhaps the faint flutter of the autumn leaves dulled their sense of hearing. Certainly they did not notice the sleepy bark of a dog basking in the sun at the farm-house down the lane, nor observe, until it was too late to retreat,

that a driving party, consisting of a carriage full of ladies, was flashing towards them. In an instant the sunbeam was blotted out, the chain fell in fragments, part clinging to the girl's neck, the remainder to Derrick's fingers as he jumped up with reddening cheeks.

"Mrs. Alymer!" exclaimed Nella, feeling half inclined to take flight up a tree after the fashion of her youth.

The horses were checked before them; the occupants showing like a bed of gay, thickly-planted flowers, looked at the pair through a dreamy haze of white veils and rose-tinted parasols.

"Miss Vere!" uttered Nest's soft tones, with an intonation of surprise which was in itself a condemnation.

"Derrick!" cried another voice, less musical in its wonder.

The last speaker was a handsome Juno-eyed woman, who seemed to have outlived the attempt to fence with time. She wore no veil, and the wrinkles were plainly visible that deepened about her brow as she stared at the couple in the wood.

Derrick picked up his hat from the region of Nella's feet, then lifting it to her, said in a clear voice, "Will you excuse me for an instant, Miss Vere, while I speak a few words to the lady in grey—Lady Dionysia Erle, my mother, you know?"





## CHAPTER XVI.

### SAPPERS AND MINERS.

**P**oor Nella! If she had but possessed a book to hold, or a tanglement of worsted work—anything that should have given her hand some occupation! They had needed none up to this moment, thanks to the daisy chain and Derrick's fingers; but the first resource was childish, the last improper, as it now seemed to her.

"My dear boy," Lady Dionysia murmured blandly to her son, "it was indiscreet of Nest to stop the carriage. I fear we have interrupted a paraphrase of the 'gardener's daughter.' Who is that young person?"

Nest interrupted. "Hush-h-h! that is Miss Vere!"—a fact of which Lady Dionysia was perfectly aware, but she said "Oh-h!" which monosyllable was so eloquent that Derrick flushed crimson. His tone was as expressive as her own while he said in a low but decided voice—

"You have perhaps guessed *what* she is to me, mother. I want you to know and to like——"

"I am sure to do so," his mother replied sweetly. "You must forgive my mistake, Derrick. No doubt she looks very differently when she is properly dressed. So anxious was I, my dear boy, to meet your wishes on this subject, that directly I received your letter I came down to the Limes to see for myself how matters stood. We have just been to call at Mr. Vere's. Indeed, Derrick, I shall *try* and like her for your sake."



Meanwhile Nest cried out to Nella—

"Miss Vere, we have just called at your house, and were so unfortunate as to find no one at the house."

"I regretted to miss seeing Mr. Vere; he is an old acquaintance of mine," volunteered Lady Dionysia. "Some one—the housekeeper, I think—said he was away from home."

Nella pondered. Whom could they mean by the housekeeper? Not old Isaac, the butler. A dreadful idea flashed across her mind. Dora, she thought. Dora must have been in some way entrapped by the visitors, and her staid air and plain dress have deceived them into the misapprehension of her position; but Mrs. Alymer knew Dora slightly, and would have explained matters. Nella's second idea was that the mistake was intentional; and her brown eyes flashed as, lifting up her head with a haughty gesture, which was a novel and additional charm in the eyes of the lover in the roadway, she said in her fresh clear voice—

"We have no housekeeper, Mrs. Alymer. Your friend must have seen my sister, Mrs. Chaunter. She usually spends the day here when my father is absent."

"I am sure I must apologise," Lady Dionysia began suavely. "I am so shocked. Derrick, only think—I mistook this young lady's sister for a housekeeper!"

"Certainly I am surprised that you did not know the difference," Nella said, with an ironical intonation which raised her immensely in Nest's opinion.

"Since you are at home, we may as well fulfil our purpose," Mrs. Alymer said. "We will turn back to the house."

"Will not Miss Vere accompany us?" suggested Lady Dionysia, with a furtive trouble in her face.

But Miss Vere preferred to walk back. The distance was short; she should be there in time to receive them.

"You will come with me, Derrick?" pleaded his mother. "We have been separated so long, Miss Vere, you will excuse my son, will you not?"

Nella bowed and turned away. Derrick looked after her, and hesitated.

"Why do you keep Mrs. Alymer waiting?" his mother

said quickly. "Do you not see that Miss Vere expects you to come with us?"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Erle, pray come with us," came, in a soft chorus, from behind the white veils.

"One minute," Derrick cried; and, jumping the stream, ran lightly up the wood-path to the garden-gate. "Darling, let me open it for you." He bowed with a grand air as he passed through, while whispering under his breath—"I shall not come up to the house with all those popinjays. I shall speak a few words with my mother, and then go home. Good-bye, my heart, until to-morrow."

He was back in a few seconds; but keen-eyed Nest had watched him narrowly.

"Was the latch stiff?" she asked demurely.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Nella and her elder sister sat in cozy unity over the kitchen fire at Vere.

"I want to tell you all about it," the former had said emphatically, "and I can't talk unless I have a fire to talk over."

So, when the servants had gone to bed, Dora was induced to forego her dignity so far as to take possession of a wooden chair and a share of the apples which Nella had piled in a basket which stood on the fire-screen in equitable proximity to the hands of each sister.

Nella perched on the fender, and took a few preliminary bites.

"When he was out of sight," she began (and a tone of sentiment was audible in spite of the apple)—

"You mean when they were all gone," corrected Dora.

"He opened the garden-gate first, you know, and then went back; and I suppose he couldn't help doing so, as it was his mother—eh, Dora."

Dora was not comforting.

"I should like to see Mr. Chaunter neglecting me for the sake of his mother," she said, with ominous emphasis.

"Never mind Mr. Chaunter," Nella interrupted impatiently. "When I looked back there was nothing visible but the carriage-wheels twirling in a cloud of dust. I could just see the crown of Derrick's hat. After that I saw him no more."

"Never mind Derrick's hat," mocked the other. "I see plenty of hats, but I haven't been close to a Parisian bonnet since I was confirmed. I want to hear all about the women. It was a very hasty glance I got at them when they caught me walking near the front door. I had no notion they were coming back again, or I would not have gone to see old widow Brown. I suppose you were looking very untidy, Nella? I have often warned you of it." And Dora shook her head with the melancholy satisfaction of one who has prophesied retribution in vain to a friend who has a trick of flying in the face of Providence.

"They came into the drawing-room," pursued Nella, "with little short struts, like a swarm of peacocks. The drawing-room was looking at its worst; all the threadbare sofa cushions turned shabbiest corners upwards, and the most faded chairs in the light. It must be very nice to be so rich as to be able to turn your furniture to any side you like."

"What did they talk about?"

"Nothing—or at least very little. But they made up for it by looking very hard. They had eye-glasses, which were full of eloquence. If I made an observation I was answered by an eye-glass. At first I was rather abashed: not so the parrot; he eyed them with an air of mingled curiosity and affection. At last he could resist no longer, but flew on to one lady's shoulder and claimed her gold eye-glass gently. She shrieked aloud; he more loudly. It was rather a relief to me, after being magnetised so long by their glassiness. Lady Dionysia was not there—she had walked towards the Limes with her son. I think her eyes are something like——"

"I want to know what her bonnet was like," persisted Dora. "I may have to come to a middle-aged style myself soon."

"An indefinite bunch of silk and lace. I can't remember more. The other women had enormous humps on their heads and backs."

"You mean panniers," Mrs. Chaunter said breathlessly. "Oh, Nella, *do* try and remember if the under skirts were plain or frilled."

"My impressions are vague, but I think they looked Cochinchina-ish about the legs."

Dora nodded her head solemnly.

"Fluted, I shouldn't wonder. I thought they were coming to it; I whispered as much to the churchwarden's wife that Sunday we first saw Mrs. Alymer at church. When Mr. Chaunter was preaching that beautiful sermon about the lilies of the field being so superior to sewing machines, and, my dear, just as he said, 'Take heed lest ye overvalue the labour given to outward adornment,' I saw a gap in her flounce, and then I knew it wasn't hand-work. And it really seemed a judgment on her."

"One girl seemed very handsome," Nella said irrelevantly. "I wonder if Derrick admires her?"

Hereat a sigh, thwarting a piece of apple, nearly choked her.

"Did they look at the pictures?" Dora asked, with conscious pride. Some of the pictures were rare and good, and they being strictly entailed, Mr. Vere had not been able to enter their value in his betting book.

"They looked much harder at the carpet, especially where it is darned. One of them looked up at the Girl and the Dove; and this giving me an opening for an observation, I asked feebly—Did she like pictures? She elevated her eyebrows. 'Like hardly expresses it,' she drawled; 'I adore good paintings, but then they must be good.' 'I am glad then to be able to show you something worthy of your critical appreciation,' I said. 'The Girl and the Dove is considered a very beautiful, as it is a very authentic, example of Greuze.' 'People are so often deceived about their own possessions,' she began—and then came a pause even more impertinent than her words. 'Such as the possession of a critical faculty?' I suggested. 'There is no doubt about the picture, you know, for my great-grandfather purchased it of the painter, of whom he was a personal friend.' Mrs. Alymer then came forward, all grace and softness, and made me feel as if I were a moral hedgehog. 'I came here to ask your father if he could spare you for a few days to be my guest at the Limes. Do come,' she urged. 'Derrick Erle will be there; as he is going to receive his commission shortly,

he has promised to come and be with his mother for the last days of his vacation. You, too, will doubtless be glad to see a little of your old playmate before he goes.' During the first part of her speech I was saying to myself, 'No, no, no! two or three days with you all will suppress me out of existence.' But when she said that about Derrick——"

"You don't mean to say you accepted!" exclaimed Dora in astonishment. "Why you'll be as happy as a caged squirrel. What did you answer?"

Nella said she had left it open. She did not tell her sister that the news of Derrick's being about to receive his commission was startling to her in its abruptness. Nest had read the unexpressed "no" in her face, and had speedily divined the cause of her after acquiescence. "Poor thing," mused Nest; "how young she is to think she will see more of him by coming to the Limes! They will be state prisoners, and each have a guard of honour about them all day. Lady Dionysia will be so kind to her, I almost wish I were unmarried and ineligible; I should enjoy a spar with Derrick's mamma."

"You will come the day after to-morrow, then, if Mr. Vere does not object?" she said aloud.

"I will consult him to-night," Nella had answered, with dreaming eyes.

"Well, Nella," Dora said spitefully, "rather you than me. It is well that Mrs. Alymer doesn't ask me, for Mr. Chaunter would never permit of it. Now I will go to bed, as I must return home early to-morrow to get things in order for him."

Nella arose unwillingly. She dreaded going to sleep on the new and uncomfortable thought Mrs. Alymer had suggested. She must see Derrick somehow to-morrow, and learn how the truth was. She fingered the faded rose in her dress; he had pinned it there in the morning, when it was

"Not royal in its scent alone,  
But in its hue."

Now it looked as squalid as only dead flowers can look.

"It's of no use sniffing at that," cried prosaic Dora:

"the scent is gone; and even if it weren't the room is too cheesy to permit of any other odour being perceptible. Also it is black-beetley;" and, with a hasty plucking up of her skirts, Mrs. Chaunter walked on tiptoe across the sanded floor. The sisters occupied the same sleeping room. "Do not let frivolous thoughts distract you from your devotions," Mrs. Chaunter said serenely. "But oh, Nella, I shan't sleep for thinking of those fluted skirts. If it should please Providence to take Mr. Chaunter's mother, it would seriously affect——"

"Your poor husband," Nella broke in sympathetically.

"The manner in which I should have the mourning made up," her sister said with emphasis. "But unless she leaves us a handsome legacy, she won't pay for fluted skirts; they take such a quantity of material."

On the next day Nella moped alone in the garden. Derrick had not come, but she held a little twisted note in her hand which excused his absence, if ever a lover's absence can be excused.

"DEAREST,—Hurrah! I've got my commission. I'm to be gazetted directly. Isn't it kind of my mother? she managed everything for me. After all, fathers have their good points: if, in addition to my purchase-money, mine gives his consent to our immediate marriage, I shall vote him a good fellow. I could not come to-day, my mother has occupied me; but then our conversation has been chiefly about yourself. I hope some one's face has looked dull in my absence. I am so happy to think you are coming to the Limes: I want to show you my uniform. My mother has promised to speak to Mr. Vere of our wishes; she is anxious to be the first to move in the matter, and begs us to say nothing at present.

"Your own DERRICK.

"P.S.—I worship you.

"P.S.S.—It is blue, and gold aiguillettes; busby-bag, scarlet; plume, black and white."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Vere returned home irritable and preoccupied; his daughter understood by his face that it would be wise to speak to him as little as possible, and that the tax papers

and the tradesmen's bills had better not be produced from their dusty seclusion behind the chimney mirror for the present. He looked at the home faces without seeing them; in the evening he dozed in his chair without resting—he had become a confirmed victim to chance. His days were consumed by feverish spasms of hopes or fears. "Beat in his trial," he muttered in his sleep; then awoke with a start, crying, "Oh dear, I thought I had tumbled over that d——d tout in the bushes." He looked at Nella with a troubled expression when she mentioned her wish to accept Mrs. Alymer's invitation.

"How you are growing!" he said discontentedly. "But you are quite a child yet, Nella; you won't be marriageable for the next two Derbies. Oh yes, you can go to the Limes; I daresay you will enjoy the cooking."





## CHAPTER XVII.

### AT FREEZING POINT.

**T**HE lights of the Limes glimmering frostily, they seemed to stare at her like the bleak eyes of the fashionable ladies, who had slighted her with their looks on the previous day. Still her intention did not fail, there was one soul which would gladden at her coming, one face glow at sight of hers ; but oh, Derrick, she thought, it was much nicer crushing the dead nuts underfoot in the woods than it will be making mincing steps on Mrs. Alymer's Brussels carpet.

"They'll sit upon you," Dora said darkly, as she watched Nella's preparations for the visit. It must be understood that Dora alluded to moral not physical compassion : "they'll sit upon you with their Paris-cut dresses, and strange talk. They will be as foreigners to you, only not half so polite, for they won't try to make you understand them."

"Mrs. Alymer is always very kind to Lucy Smyth," Nella said ruefully.

"Lucy Smyth is shaped like a dumpling, and is as heavy as one. It would give a man mental indigestion to talk to her ; of course she is popular at the Limes, such a sweet, good girl, Mrs. Alymer calls her."

"Why shouldn't they be kind to me ?"

"Because you are not altogether ugly," Dora admitted grudgingly. "If they find out that you have intelligence, especially such will-o'-the-wisp intelligence as yours, you



will put all their bristles up: they will call you odd, or eccentric, perhaps mad—that is a favourite epithet by which common-place people excuse their incomprehension of genius."

"You never owned before that I had any attraction either of mind or person," Nella cried, with sparkling eyes. "Thank you, Dolly, a thousand times for helping me to think well of myself. I shan't care a bit now for their riches or petty spites. Derrick won't fall in love with a bunch of ribbons, I suppose, and while he looks at me the others may look over my head for what I care."

Dora shook her head. "Men are sometimes much affected by the verdict of a feminine jury," she said, "and no woman is too silly not to have a genius for spite. Depend on it, Nella, this invitation bodes you no good; you are only asked there on the principle on which the spider asked the baron of bluebottles to come and have a buzz in his parlour; you'll be dissected. And pray what are you to wear?" she added, with voice deepened to solemnity.

"The heroine in fiction always dresses in book muslin," Nella suggested gaily. "Economy blending with innocence."

"Fine economy," grumbled her sister; "they cost as much to make as any other dress: you can never wear them more than once, as the innocent look vanishes after the black coat sleeves of your partner have described circles round your waist."

"The heroine with a remote uncle in India wears fine Indian muslin," amended Nella. "I have a piece, it was mamma's. Unfortunately it looks limp in the extreme. Other heroines receive pleasant surprises from their papas in the shape of unexpected boxes musical with a delicious rustle of tissue paper, and possessing an under-wealth of white silk, which fits to perfection, despite its never having been tried on."

"If you are determined to turn it all into a jest, I shall leave you to your own devices," Mrs. Chaunter said crossly. "I'm thankful I'm not to be shown up as a dowdy before all those dressy May-poles."

Nella was snubbed, and entreated forgiveness: "Do

help me, Dolly ; I can do nothing without you." What sister, however acrimonious, could withstand such an appeal ? Even the remorseless heroine of Binnorie would scarcely have refused to lace her sister's bodice, ere she thrust her under water, had she believed there were likely to be any evening parties among the kelpies. "I will think it over to-night, and let you know in the morning," was Dora's parting benediction, and Nella went to bed eager to dream away the hours until she greeted her joy again. Her slumbers were fitful and troubled, her thoughts were volatile with pleasure, even as the dragon-fly quivers in the flash of sun and stream. Her dreams were less happy than her half-wakened thoughts ; she fancied once or twice that she was surrounded by jeering masks ; they grinned ill omens at her wherever she turned ; then a whole shop window full of dolls came and danced upon her head. Their padded toes hurt her more than seemed possible at first sight. She was choked by bran and frilled petticoats. Then came a room bright and gala-looking. The dolls shot up to the size of real figures ; they were making great play with fans, and one of them bore an odd resemblance to Nest Alymer. This one fluttered about Derrick Erle, who was staring out of a dark window pane. "If you make so many faces your cheeks will crack," Nella said spitefully to this puppet, but was comforted to see that Derrick looked at it with his eyes, but not with his soul. His soul was hushed by the low sound of a wood-stream. Clouds dark over a darker copse shadowed his eyes to tenderness ; then came the wood itself, and his face pale with happiness and moon-light looking down to her own. Nella gave a deep sigh of relief, and awoke at the thought of her own joy. The dusky stillness of the dawn was scarcely yet touched by song. "So many hours between me and noon," she sighed ; "oh for the sun and the chatter of birds !"

Mrs. Chaunter was an early visitant—her face was triumphant.

"It is really providential, Nella ; one of Mr. Chaunter's aunts has died." Nella stared. "Don't you see," the other added impatiently. "*Mourning!* When we got the letter this morning, I felt half our difficulties were

removed. You can go into black for her, Nella; the hue to be modified, of course, by the slightness of the connection. Still that it will be black is a great fact. Want of fashion in the cut; want of richness in the material; want of *chic* in the wearer; all these it will cover, like charity. There's a sentiment about it which appeals to the feelings, and it is becoming to the skin. I am going to be generous to you, Nella. I have brought with me a number of black silk scarves, which have been given to Mr. Chaunter at his funeral services. Fortunately he has buried two-and-twenty people this year, and most of them have been wealthy, and have been mourned for at seven-and-ninepence, instead of three-and-sixpence the yard. Your skirts will stand out in proportion: you, I, and my maid will set to work at once and make it up."

Nella dared not look ungrateful, but the notion of symbolising two-and-twenty funerals in her appearance was not a cheerful one. She felt more satisfied when, later in the day, she tried on the robe before a pier glass, the dust-dimmed light of which reflected the dazzle of her white round arms and dimpled shoulders, enhanced by the black glossy silk. The bodice fitted tight to the roundest of waists, and undulated over a Psyche-shaped bosom. Dora caught up her sister's sunny tresses, and twisted them into a coronal of braids to crown the otherwise undecked head. The girl stood flushing and shy in sight of her own beauty. It was an embodiment of spring-tide dressed in mourning weeds. When all was done, and Nella had resumed her ordinary dress, she bade her sister adieu, and received from her a few parting words of advice, concluding with: "Heaven bless you, my dear; and, whatever you do, don't be attractive to the men, or the women will be merciless."

Mr. Vere looked kindly at his young daughter when she came before him ready clad for her journey. Her mantle was limp and depressed looking; her hat showed memories of rainy days; the comforter round her throat was of coarse woollen; but the royalty of her fresh beauty shone through all. The brown gold of the masses of hair made riches about her head: her cheeks were the faint reflection of a knot of pink roses that were fastened at her

throat, and, like them, seemed to have taken their colour from sun and dew.

"So you're going to run in strange company. I wish I could have afforded you new colours," Mr. Vere said regretfully. To Nella's surprise he got into the carriage which was to convey her to the Limes. "Couldn't let you show on the course without your trainer," he added, answering her look of surprise; then dropping hyperbole, he said, in a graver tone, "I don't choose you to go without escort to the Limes. Poverty should not deprive you of the attention due to your sex—and I may add to your appearance, for I suppose you know you are good-looking, eh Nella? Let that reflection comfort you if you find any grand dames trying to rustle you into the belief that the silkworm is the principal creator of beauty."

The girl looked out on the wan landscape with morning eyes; she thought she must be fair because she was so happy. The trill of spring birds, the chime of early bells, the gay leap of the wood stream, she seemed to hear them all in that leaden atmosphere; night had its clouds on the land, and mist blurred it, but there is no twilight for the heart that believes.

"Your cheeks are brighter than this faded pink lining, Nella. How I detest every symptom of poverty! Time flies; it seems only last evening that your mother drove in this brougham to the first ball we went to after our marriage. She was beautifully dressed (I had credit at Madame Ruche's then), and I must say, Nella, you always contrive to look a dowdy. Your mother was very ungrateful, poor soul! she grumbled because she had to economise for two years out of the household expenses to pay the bill. She was an excellent woman—too excellent for this world. She had a terrible mania for solvency. Ah, well! no doubt she is appreciated where she is. We are close to the Limes now."

They passed a depressed-looking lodge weighted by ivy, and drove up the dim, silent road through an avenue of elms; dense shadows of trees sketched against a troubled sky.

The Limes doors opened, and a flame of red light shot for a moment over the grey balustrades and urns smothered

with odorous tendrils. Then it closed, and Mr. Vere and his daughter were being ushered by an escort of footmen towards a room in which music and laughter were echoing in soft discord.

"Cheer up, Nella," her father whispered kindly, observing that his daughter's clasp of his arm was growing somewhat spasmodic. "Don't let these underbred solemnities of wealth overawe you. My dear, if I had backed the Ritter Bann for the Moslem I would never be worried by having all these coarse animals about me. I will see you fairly started before I leave you."

Nella strained her ears, but could not distinguish Derrick's voice in the dreaded chamber. She was not certain that she wished to recognise him amidst a host of strange faces; if their looks depreciated her, might not his catch some faint reflection of their unfriendliness?

The door opened on an atmosphere yet rosier than that of the firelit hall. The room was the gayest and most luxurious Nella had ever seen. Everything was pink tinted; the cushioned seats seemed invented for every possible attitude of weariness or languor. In her first confused under-glance she only perceived that all was glitter, and that nothing so dull-hued as a man's coat was visible—*ergo*, Derrick was not there. Richly-dressed women leaned their shining, braided heads against the chair-backs. Nella, only accustomed to view the limited stock of the village hairdresser, thought these chignons marvels of hair-architecture, as they were. The cheeks of these ladies were rarely delicate in their bloom, they seemed as though they had rubbed off a faint tint from the silken pillows they pressed. The tables were covered with expensive knick-knacks, the very atmosphere was costly in its summer-like perfume which was diffused by stands of rare hothouse flowers; from the glittering gewgaws which ornamented the women's cars to the flossey rugs in which their feet nestled, everything spoke of the exaggerations of wealth. There was nothing that could mar the harmony of all this luxury. The work that idled in white hands was fancy work; the voices that murmured were as untroubled and unthoughtful, but softer than the harsh gaiety of the foreign bird who swung and stared in

his brazen ring by the fire ; but for the shadow of a bent old woman struggling wearily along the footpath that skirted the park, and dimly visible through the flame-touched window-panes, you might have thought that anguish and want were not.

One or two of the loungers shot a glance at the newcomers over their tea-cups ; another, who was Mrs. Alymer, advanced to meet them ; a third, a massive-looking woman clad in rich velvet, and who was verging towards age, but handsome withal, looked keenly at Nella while pretending to be absorbed in a book ; it is an instance of women's reconnoitring abilities that all these apparently indifferent and unregarding feminine eyes appraised with a glance the full value of every charm Nella possessed, and the worthlessness of her every article of dress. Mr. Vere, easy, well-bred, and well-dressed, met Mrs. Alymer with a fluent apology for accompanying his daughter to the Limes.

" I thought myself bound to ensure her personal safety by bringing her myself," he said ; " as to her happiness, that I am sure is secured now that she is your guest."

Mrs. Alymer looked askance at Nella's blooming cheeks.

" They are dreadfully wholesome," she thought ; " I declare I shall have to rouge up to them or I shall appear quite pale."

Nella thought her father had never looked so handsome or seemed so dignified in his bearing as to-night, and involuntarily compared him to her tame hawk, who lifted his wings and took a sudden splendour of eye and motion at the sight of a mate. Mr. Vere had spoken with a certain amount of emphasis ; he did not object to the insouciances of pretty women when such were directed towards himself ; but he knew that what was often a compliment to a man was a slight to a woman ; he would not go for an instant or two, he thought, until some of this rose-coloured ice had begun to thaw.

Nest was favourably impressed by his manner, and urged him to stay and dine. She happened to address him by his name, and a faint cry of apparent surprise broke from the massive lady in velvet ; her handsome brown eyes seemed to brighten with pleasure as she darted

across the room with an airiness of manner at variance with her appearance.

"Is it possible that I recognise an old acquaintance? Your face makes me feel as if mine were twenty years younger, Mr. Vere. I fear you have quite forgotten Dionysia Bonton. How often we danced away time in the balls at A—— House. And this is your daughter, dear child. My son, Derrick, has often spoken of his little playmate. She must be my especial charge while she is here. Poor little thing! how cold her hands are! What is your name—Pernel? How very odd! Come to the fire, my child, and let me chafe your hands."

Mrs. Alymer glanced at Lady Dionysia with admiration. "Clever woman," she thought. "What an extinguisher she is! but it is a great trouble that scientific mode of repression. I'm glad I've no sons."

Mr. Vere looked on well pleased. He did not realize that Nella was in worse plight than before, while her poor little gloves were subjected to the bland wonder of Lady Dionysia's eye, and the numb, red little hands were enfolded in Lady Dionysia's satin-white palms. The fire caught her face until her cheeks seemed painted with flame. "Oh!" she thought, "if she would only let me go, this great velvety ogress, before Derrick comes in and sees me contrasted with all these cool-faced women. Mrs. Alymer introduced her to the rest of the guests. One was plump and languid, and suggested the comfortable image of a purring white cat: this was the Hon. Mrs. Lotus. Another, whose face was dark and eager as a toy-terrier's, was Miss Seton. Nella recognised this young lady—it was she who had depreciated the Greuze. "So clever and accomplished," murmured Mrs. Alymer; "it is only kind, dear Miss Vere, to put your tongue on your guard; she is the most perfect testor of mental adulteration. And this is Miss Carnegie, but I think you have seen both these ladies before." Hearing her name mentioned, Miss Carnegie lifted up one of the loveliest and most ungracious faces possible. With her delicate features and waving hair she showed perfect against the dusk as an antique gem; her large grey eyes were sullen; her shapely lips were contracted into an expression of ill

humour. Never was a soul so at war with its outward mask; she gave a testy little nod of her head at the new-comer, then veiled her beauty behind a fan as though irritated by the admiration which beamed in the girl's frank eyes. "I wonder why she looks so cross," mused Nella; "to see herself in the glass ought to make her the essence of amiability."

Mr. Vere stood by his daughter for a few seconds chatting to her captor, and taking mental notes of the other occupants of the room. "Mrs. Lotus will be civil to her, unless the same man admires both. Miss Seton will be gracious until she finds the child's intelligence outshines her own. The other girl shows temper in her eye. As for Lady Dionysia's kind manner, I really think Nella owes something to me in that matter; I certainly did dance with her very often, and women's memories are limpet-like in tenacity;" and at this stage of his musings, Mr. Vere settled his necktie complacently, and curled his iron-grey moustache with quite a youthful gesture. It did not occur to him to distrust Derrick Erle's mother on his daughter's account; he was perpetually forgetting that Nella was grown up, although he knew the exact age of nearly every living horse in the racing calendar; he could never have a bet on her, and so she rarely entered into his calculations. Still he was glad to leave her, as he thought, at ease and in kind hands. He did not divine how much of mischief kept covert in Nest's baby dimples, what unwholesome subtlety lurked in her unspoken thoughts.

He bade them all good evening, pressed Lady Dionysia's hand tenderly, thereby causing Nella's release; rejected Mrs. Alymer's repeated invitation firmly, but courteously, and nodding to his daughter, made his escape.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he found himself in his brougham again.

He had so long enjoyed the haphazard comforts of poverty that this atmosphere of regulated luxury rather bored him. "That poor little girl looked somewhat shabby amongst all those fine plumes; I wish I could have afforded her a new dress. What an excellent cigar! so it ought to be, considering its price. My poor dear



wife never let me smoke going home—heigho! she can't be annoyed by it now—and 'tis all for the best, no doubt."

He was gone, and Nella felt shabbier than ever now that the protection of his well-cut coat and easy manner was withdrawn from her.

She felt that she was a drabbed-looking daisy, sadly out of place with all these gay-hued greenhouse flowers. No one was directly uncivil, of course, but the lady in velvet seemed to be taking a mental inventory of her defects of attire, and the rest of the company neglected her in the civilest way in the world. Nella was totally unused to society. She had found the poor hospitable when they themselves were hunger-pinched; polite when sorely wrought by trouble. She had yet to learn what a moral frost prosperity develops.

Mrs. Alymer looked at Nella, and smothered a slight yawn. "Wouldn't you like to see your room, Miss Vere? It is time to dress for dinner. I will send my maid to see if she can be of any service to you."

The party dispersed; Lady Dionysia was attentive to the extent of accompanying Nella upstairs.

"I will see you down again when you are ready," she said blandly, "or you may lose your way."

Nella thanked her, but chafed inwardly. It was very nice to be petted by Derrick's mother, but was she to have no opportunity of exchanging one happy glance with Derrick unobserved by these strangers? She was glad to be left alone, to enjoy the luxury of weeping a few tears of depression in proximity to a can of hot water. There was no one to stare at her reddening features; the kindly element would presently comfort nose and lids. Mrs. Alymer's maid came, but was politely dismissed. Miss Vere always dressed herself, she said, and was forthwith condemned in the abigail's mind as "no lady." There is nothing your lady's-maid resents more than independence in her superior: it is a quality apt to baffle curiosity and disappoint speculation.

Nella's toilette was soon finished. She looked at herself in the glass with the pain of diffidence. She had "faith in her pure red and white, her burnished coils

of hair, and simply-cut dress. She had not seen Derrick ; but she had seen a beautiful woman whom he must have seen. To be in love, and to know that your lover can look at a face fairer than your own, is in itself a keen pang. The poet who had once loved a woman sufficiently to make him turn satirist of the sex, has told us that every one of them is "at heart a rake." It is certain that every woman who loves is at heart a Turk, and would delight in imprisoning her heart's desire, with that refinement of jealousy which makes the Mussulman rage at even ocular admiration of his love. Nella left her bedroom, giving a nervous look in the direction where Lady Dionysia had disappeared, determined if possible to find her way down by herself. Passing through a dimly-lighted corridor at the foot of the stairs, she heard her name whispered ; a side door opened ; some one drew her into a room ; some one's touch, eyes, and voice, brought back her happiness and self-esteem in one brief splendid minute.

"I wasn't going to meet you first with all those wooden-headed women looking at us," Derrick said.

Nella, stifled, but exceedingly joyous, whispered : "Don't you think Miss Carnegie beautiful ?"

He answered indifferently : "I have never thought about the subject."

A perfect answer, was it not ? Nella, radiant, went on her way, fastening a yellow rose in her bosom which she had not possessed before. Other roses—pink ones—glowed on the cheeks his lips had lighted on. Bright with remembering eyes she passed into the drawing-room, and encountered the wondering gaze of a gentleman—its sole occupant.

"You have forgotten me, Miss Vere. I am Walter Rolfe."

She recognised the pale, unwholesome face, the nervous lip, and stretched out a firm cool hand to meet his, which shook even more than of old.

"How did you know me ?" she asked shyly. "I have never seen you but through a window once, nor you me but in the dark."

"I heard that you were coming, for one thing," he said, smiling. "Besides, you entered this room only

twenty minutes after the dressing-bell rang; that proved you to be the youngest woman of the party."

Nella held her peace. She was not yet expert in the art of polite badinage. Walter Rolfe liked her none the less for her silence. "What a handsome girl it is!" he thought. What a spring-tide face; and eyes, such as get into a man's dreams!"





## CHAPTER XVIII.

### NOT IN THEIR SET.

“**W**HAT a lovely rose!” Lady Dionysia said at dinner time, eyeing Nella’s sole ornament. The latter blushed a little and looked conscious, whereat every woman in the room understood how she had become possessed of it.

Mr. Rolfe, who sat near her, said kindly: “I prefer real roses to artificial ones,” with the slightest perceptible glance at the artistically coloured cheeks that bloomed around the table.

“When Walter is sober he is intolerably acute,” Nest thought discontentedly. Mrs. Alymer was feeling cross—so cross that she was smiling more than usual. Nella’s beauty displeased her, and Mr. Rolfe’s apparent appreciation of it was having a very bad effect on Derrick. Derrick trying to send bitter under-glances at the pair through a screen of flowers; Derrick answering his neighbour absently; Derrick toying with his bread; then suddenly becoming abstinent; then sulky; then dignified; was showing simultaneously his youth and his passion. The old perhaps feel the bitter freaks of jealousy more keenly, but they have learnt the miserable art of self-control. Dinner was a far more solemn ceremony than Nella in her ignorance had imagined possible. Mr. Rolfe smiled at her wonder.

“Did you not know that an Englishman’s dinner was his religion? You look shocked. Well, have you not

seen people go to sleep at church time? Mrs. Alymer has the best eye in the world for a dozing corner; she says the clergyman never finds her out, and having saved appearances, she seems to think she has saved everything. Did you ever see any-one sleep over their dinner? Look at their faces; hark to their conversation. Every faculty is alert. And look at the adjuncts of the ceremony: the best of their silver; their gayest dresses; their highest class domestics; their rarest flowers; all are taxed to do honour to the national accomplishment. Is it possible, Miss Vere, that you underrate the importance of the two gravest hours in a grave Englishman's day?"

"I always get the meal over as soon as possible at home," Nella said simply. "I read a book most of the time, and sit as I like in my chair. I am getting very tired of having sat upright so long, and I don't like the scent of flowers to mix with that of food, it seems incongruous. Neither do I like my plate being haunted by all these big men-servants. My cats and dogs stare me out of countenance; they wrinkle their mouths and lick their lips until they have got everything off my plate. But here the food is snatched away almost 'twixt fork and lip, without my being able to feel the sacrifice a beneyolent and voluntary one."

Mrs. Alymer gave the signal to retire.

"Breakers ahead!" murmured Mr. Rolfe, with a look of pity at his companion. "Nest never leaves so soon as this when she is happy. She is an adept in the art of enjoying the present: not like us poor men, who are always standing on tiptoe and straining our necks to get a peep of to-morrow."

"What did you say?" Nella asked absently.

"That I hope you will find some photograph books or albums on the drawing-room table."

"Why so?"

"You are sure to see plenty of smiling faces there—nervous grins, raised by the forcing eye of the photographer, but amiable nevertheless. I think there is more of the hyena than the photographer in Mrs. Alymer's smile to-night."

"Do you like her?" Nella asked with the frank directness of a child.

"Of course I like everything that is nice. I like liqueur, but it isn't good enough for me." He added, *sotto voce*, "Good-bye for the present, Miss Vere; I'm afraid you'll find it rather cold upstairs."

Nella did not heed him. She had suddenly heard Derrick's voice, and its sound made her pulses throb anew. Sometimes a chance look or word recalls to us our beloved's presence with the sweetness of a fresh greeting. "So you are there, love," we whisper in that glad heart-leap. Nella gave a hasty glance in the direction of the voice; Derrick's head was determinately turned away, but even his back curls were more comforting than Mr. Rolfe's full-eyed admiration. As she followed the train of rustling silks through the red gloom of the hall, she looked longingly at a bleak-eyed window—a casement which framed a strip of gloomy upland, in which sparkled a far-off cottage fire. She would like to jump through it and trace a path in the meadow-grasses until she reached her own door and was greeted by the home tokens—her dog's sleekened ears of delight, and her cat's surprised tail. Subduing her vagrant impulse, she followed the procession meekly, thinking she had never known before how much of the cut direct could be expressed by a lady's back. When she first appeared at the Limes, her beauty had been forgiven to her by the kinder nature of the group, in consideration of her homely dress and absence of pretension; now she was convicted of being more fair than she had at first appeared. She had talked, and she had been looked at with evident admiration by the owner of ten thousand a year. Evidently she was "bad form," affected, underbred, and therefore not a fit associate for Mrs. Lotus, whose name had been coupled with every man's but her husband's for the last ten seasons; nor for Miss Seton, who dabbled in the Social Filter Bill, and who was inclined to argue that husbands were a bygone and unnecessary institution altogether; nor with Miss Carnegie, whose pretty mouth echoed in the saloon the slang which her male acquaintances borrowed in their turn from the tattered eloquence of the mob. Mrs. Alymer too had her social scruples. She never patronised those

who had been "found out," nor did she care to admit among her guests any one who had no claims to fashion and who had the impertinence to be beautiful. For a little time after the group entered the drawing-room they seemed to be possessed by mutes; no word did any one say, and the coals dropping from the grate sounded quite thunderous.

Lady Dionysia broke the silence—

"Nest, my dear, your school-house seems quite insufficient to entertain the number of scholars so large a parish should supply; you should add to it; there is a quaint little house close by, you might join them."

"I suppose somebody lives there," Nest said vaguely.

"It cannot be any one of any importance," Lady Dionysia urged, "and you might make them some compensation."

"Oh, Mrs. Alymer!" Nella cried impulsively. "Do you know who lives there? it is Miss Lane. She is so kind to the poor, *they* know her."

"I daresay," Mrs. Alymer said coldly; "I don't know her; but I suppose she is not formed like a snail, another house could be found for her."

"Besides," Lady Dionysia said severely, "consider the object. We could not allow the comfort of one old woman to frustrate the welfare of the many."

"It would break her heart!" Nella cried; "she has lived there from childhood; the house has a soul for her, it holds all her past. She has shown me one room where she and her sister used to be measured head to head by their mother. The panels are scored by their happy, aimless touches."

"Very untidy; it would require a fresh coat of paint," Lady Dionysia interpolated.

"Her sister died in the room," Nella pursued. "She visits it every night, and kisses the pillow where the last of her kindred grew cold."

"Really it would be a charity to ensure her a change of scene," Mrs. Alymer said, toying with her fan; "for my part, I never remember anything unpleasant."

"You could not help it if you had seen all she had seen," persisted Nella. "She has nursed so many sick,

has witnessed so many deaths. If you knew her you would surely like her; she is fit company for angels."

"I daresay; but she isn't at all in *society*, Miss Vere," her hostess said stiffly, "and I can't pretend to know *all* my county neighbours."

Nella flushed, and was abashed. Something in Nest's manner told her that enthusiasm was ill-bred. "I'll never speak what I feel again, or feel what I speak," she thought. She stole away to the window, and pretended to take an interest in a frosty-eyed star; her absence seemed to be felt as a relief by the group at the fire; they began to converse, but, as Dora had prophesied, it was difficult for the country-bred girl to understand their jargon. Like most young readers of chivalrous romances, she had vague but exalted ideas of the privileges and graces of aristocracy. The nobles in her favourite fiction were feudal in their vices, but feudal also in their virtues. Savage Earl Douglas, king-making Warwick, Leicester, Essex—what powers they were for good or evil! what royal state they kept! how their will moved the nation, and how the nation prided itself on their pride! Haunted by dim recollections of the great men whom greater men have immortalised, Nella heard with wonder that Fitz Montmorency was "up a tree," poor St. Gules could not show his face at Tatts, Lord St. Couchant had escaped from England in a wine-basket, the Jews had taken possession of the Duke of Normandy Pepin's ancestral home, the name won in Palestine was not worth the paper it was written on, the descendant of crusaders had sacrificed his house's future to enrich the scum of the earth.

"Could they be speaking of real peers, or were they jesting? Was the grand old order growing rotten from age and abuse? Why were these men so unworthy their traditions?" the girl mused. "Perhaps over-much ease had made them useless, as the ladies seemed to-day, when she and her father broke on their 'strenuous idleness.' To work was to be thoughtful; she knew that much, for when she was idle on a summer's day her mind was faint in its action as the butterfly's wing. Who would grasp the coronets of self-respect and power which were slipping from these feeble white hands?" She answered her own query



—"I suppose that the class which has sent us prime ministers, lawyers, philosophers, and artists of the highest calibre, will more and more represent the dominant force in the country. The 'working classes will be the peerage of the future,' but how would the sense of decadence affect the moribund power? would it take to heart the failure of 'fame and name?' would its sons nerve themselves to efforts at self-redemption? At least they must keenly feel the disgrace of their social suicide. How dreadfully ashamed that poor Lord St. Couchant must have been when he was unpacked with the ship sherry, and what remorse the Duke of Normandy Pepin must feel! perhaps like the Heir of Linn he would hide himself from the world until he had won back his worldly honours."

Miss Seton's voice broke in on her meditations—

"St. Couchant had sent his creditors farewell notes of condolence sealed with his family crest—a fox *en retraite*, motto 'Gone away;' imagine how he laughed when he was released from his straw bed; he had been made of it so long, he said wittily, that he took it quite naturally."

"Poor Pepin is terribly out up," Miss Carnegie observed, because the brutes do not mean to let him attend the next Derby. However, he has had a good season at Baden, and always enjoys excellent health and spirits."

"Then they *don't* mind," thought perturbed Nella. "If they don't mind, nobody else will, but I shan't like the new arrangement. Snub noses and round cheeks will become fashionable, and I prefer Roman noses and blue eyes, they looked so well in the family busts. The world will smell of onions and short pipes."

"I assure you she smokes day and night," Miss Carnegie was saying; "so cheaply, too, all her cigarettes are given to her."

"Who can 'she' be, and how can her husband or father encourage such a nasty habit?" speculated the innocent at the window.

"Just before he bolted, St. Couchant fitted up his yacht for her; it was splendid—blue satin and silver."

"Did not Gules object?" queried some one. The beauty shrugged her shoulders.

"How can he, when he takes *Araminta Thespia* to the box opposite *Lady Gules* at *Covent Garden*?"

"My dears," *Lady Dionysia* said severely, "I beg you will not discuss the names and manners of actresses, or any of those sort of creatures. I assure you it isn't at all good tone; let us keep to our own set. What did *Gules* say when he found that emerald bracelet on his wife's arm, which he knew no tradesman would have trusted her with on her own credit?"

"He congratulated her so gracefully you'd have thought it was a birthday gift of his own," the beauty answered. "He was quite relieved, he said, to see that his *Augusta* had some consolation to gild such a plain-headed fellow as *St. Couchant*."

"Shocking!" smiled *Lady Dionysia*, holding up her hands. "Mrs. *Alymer*, my dear, will you excuse me for a little while. I make a point of reading a collect every evening with my maid; if I postpone it until too late an hour, the stupid girl falls asleep. I will get it over—I mean I shall not be long. Don't tell any more amusing stories until I come back; but how dreadful, is it not? thank Heaven, society was not so corrupt in my young days. I cannot bear to hear of such things!"

She swept out of the room, *Nest* glancing at her admiringly. "See the advantage of being big. What a power of virtue there is in that woman's velvet skirt! My petticoats never look like that."

"Is the virtue confined to her skirt?" murmured *Miss Seton*, with a sparkle of malice in her bright dark eyes.

"She is an excellent woman," *Nest* said gravely. "One of those who err with the utmost decorum. Her collects are part of her moral economy; people who are always begging pardon can afford to err much oftener than a poor sinner like myself, who is always too late for family prayers. Even her flirtations have a respectable element in them: they are confined to cabinet ministers, or to such as are likely to be place-holders. She does not care for emerald bracelets, but her brothers are provided for in government offices. *Derrick Erle's* fortune is assured if he has ability, and does not offend his mother."

"Is that likely?" asked *Miss Seton*. This young lady

had dabbled in everything excepting matrimony. It was time to try that experiment she thought; for some years past her eyes had been speculative whenever they were directed towards eldest or only sons.

"Not very; she governs him without his knowledge—a fatal species of subjugation. She works on his feelings. He has feelings, like most men; she has no conscience, like most women. Later on, she will rule him by his ambition, if he have it. Time will strengthen her hands for her—time, which teaches us to forget how to love others, and remember how to love ourselves. Boys are so hot-headed, liable to fools' paradises, and mad to marry girls because they love them. When Derrick is eight-and-twenty his mother will find him a wife. Lady Dionysia will hate her, of course, but less than if Derrick had chosen her. The marriage will be a success; the pair will never quarrel, because they never loved. I beg your pardon, Miss Vere, you were speaking."

Nella was not speaking, only her eyes were flashing denial into Nest's innocent blue orbs. Nest had turned quickly towards her, and by a movement of her hand with a candelabrum threw a bright light on the girl's pale face, hitherto concealed by the shadow of the curtain. All the hard, supercilious faces were turned on her. Talk of the British bayonet! commend me to the steely glance of feminine eyes that looked injury towards another woman.

"I was not speaking," Miss Vere answered quietly. "I was thinking."

"May we be permitted to ask what occupied your thoughts?" Mrs. Alymer said politely.

"If people married for love oftener than they do, perhaps the lady you were speaking of just now, Lady Gules, I think you called her, would have worn a bracelet which *her husband* had given her. And—oh, Derrick, I am so glad you are come!" The latter words were uttered in a whisper, but their sudden eloquence won forgiveness from Derrick. He had entered unperceived, and was near her, grand and protecting. Lady Dionysia entered in time to check an incipient finger squeeze.

"My dear child," she said benignly to Nella, "you

must be terribly cold at that window. Won't you come to the fire?"

"I fancied there wasn't room," Nella said meekly. Derrick frowned; he understood the implication. "I should like to shake them until all the pearl powder dropped off!" he thought, with a vindictive look at Miss Carnegie. Boys rarely appreciate petulant beauties, possibly because ill-temper scares them, or reminds them unromantically of their sisters. "How kind my mother is to Nella! how she tries to bring her into notice!"

Indeed, Lady Dionysia was quite determined that Nella should no longer be exposed to all the chances of window draughts, moonlight, and Derrick. With a parade of solicitude she placed the young girl on a seat near her own by the fire. Miss Seton sat on the other side; Miss Carnegie's morose eyes confronted them. Nest watched them from a cozy corner with an amused expression of face. Derrick hovered near his love uneasily, lifting his feet as a nervous brood hen does when hawks are about.

Lady Dionysia made the first swoop. "How do you manage to amuse yourself in the country, Miss Vere? Time must hang heavily on your hands. Really I must presume on my old acquaintance with your father, and remonstrate with him for depriving you of the advantage of town culture and tuition; but perhaps you have had masters?"

Lady Dionysia's tone implied, "if you haven't, you ought."

"No," Nella confessed; "we never had any masters."

"A governess, perhaps?"

"No."

"You astonish me. You must allow me to recommend a governess to your father—a most excellent young woman: Church of England, and a perfect French accent. I suppose you do not draw then? Miss Seton, my dear, you should show your water-colour sketches to Miss Vere, they would stimulate her to exertion. I suppose you do a good deal of fancy work, Miss Vere?"

"I hate work of all sorts," Miss Vere said energetically.

"I can't imagine any one's taking any pleasure in exercising fancy in the matter of woollen flowers, or those

ugly little patches of colour in quilt work, which seem to be staring with the surprise of the unexpected meeting."

"Really! there is no accounting for tastes. I always think needlework such a lady-like occupation. You are fond of music, I suppose?"

"I like hearing the birds sing."

"But you play? You will let us have the pleasure of hearing you presently, and Miss Carnegie too. Miss Carnegie is a fine performer."

"I'll play the only two airs I know," Nella said simply, "if you care to hear them."

"I'll give thee all, I can no more, tho' poor the offering be," hummed Nest in her corner. "Miss Vere had better not exhaust all her musical stock to-night, or we shall have nothing to look forward to to-morrow," she added demurely.

"You can both play and draw, Nell—I mean Miss Vere!" cried Derrick, fuming. "Mother, you must not be deceived by Miss Vere's modesty."

"I will not," Lady Dionysia said politely. "I shall expect great things from you. There is a sonata of Beethoven's on the piano—I adore Beethoven. Will you oblige us?"

Nella looked at a portentous wrinkle of the moving velvet skirt with misery in her face. "Pray don't," she gasped; "really, Lady Dionysia, I know nothing about it."

"I am sure you sing?" said Walter Rolfe, who had joined the group. "There is music in your face."

"My dear Walter," remonstrated insolent Nest, *sotto voce*, "if the champagne has affected your head, that is no reason you should attempt to turn hers."

Inwardly Nella was glowing with indignation; they were baiting her, these skilled tormentors. One day she would be greater than they—too great to care for revenge. Her mind was rich with undeveloped power. She knew that she could see, hear, and feel things which did not exist for these puppets of fashion, but they were expert in malice, and could express it more deftly than she could show her chaotic strength. From her books she had learnt pure and graceful English; from nature all those

wild fancies which go to create that soul which is called a poet; but she did not know the latest town scandal, nor the latest town slang. She could not sing any of Claribel's ballads, nor could she play an intricate piece of instrumental music with the rapidity of fireworks, and the decision of sledge hammers.

Clearly she was, as Miss Seton whispered to Derrick, "quite out of her element, poor thing." Lady Dionysia supplemented this with: "An amiable girl no doubt, my dear boy, but quite unformed."

"I suppose, Miss Vere," Agatha Seton said aloud, "your tranquil, eventless life enables you to give study and thought to social ethics. What do you think of woman's rights?"

"My brothers say women have none; girls are made to be boys' fags." Miss Seton shrugged her shoulders. Nella, looking at her defiantly, added, "And I like it. If they were my fags I should have a contempt for them."

Lady Dionysia recommenced: "You do not care for geology; surely you must like botany. Ferns are my passion, they look so graceful under a glass case. Perhaps you make wax flowers? No! Then *what*—" She paused; and the pause supplied: "What on earth *can* you do?"

"I can play cricket," Nella said coolly; "I can climb a tree on occasion, and I can milk a cow. Can your ladyship do it? I suppose not; it is very difficult."

Mr. Rolfe chuckled. "Guard the return, Lady Dionysia, you've hit her too hard," he murmured.

"You have no opportunities of studying languages, of course?" Miss Seton said, coming to her leader's rescue.

"I beg your pardon," Nella retorted demurely, "I have learned several words of an unknown tongue to-night. You said just now you were 'fetched' by some one, but that some one else was 'chalk.'"

"That was only a little harmless slang," Agatha said hastily.

"Oh that is slang, is it? I did not know. I felt sure it wasn't English."

"But," cried Miss Carnegie solemnly, with her eyes travelling from Nella's bottom founce to the plainly-cu

bodice, "What can you do about dress in these wilds? I assure you no one can make a dress but Worth."

"That is unfortunate, as it convicts her of the impropriety of appearing without one," murmured Nest, aside.

Mr. Rolfe whispered something to Derrick about "her being able to stand it better than most women, by Jove;" whereat Derrick flushed with anger, and felt inclined to knock the profanator down. Derrick was disturbed. Matters had not turned out quite as he had expected: his mother seemed dignified, Mrs. Alymer sulky, Nella wrathful, and Walter Rolfe impertinent. Wishing to turn the subject, he asked:

"Who hunts to-morrow? The meet is at Willowwood, two miles hence. Miss Seton will cut us all down as usual, I suppose."

"I'll do my best," that lady said gaily, "if you'll give me a mount on Iris."

Derrick smiled assent, and in his heart anathematised the petitioner. "She's my best hunter," he groaned to Rolfe. "I'd as soon shoot her as lend her to a woman; they're always galloping or crawling, they are the most mediumless creatures."

"Do you care to come out, Miss Vere?" Mr. Rolfe asked. "If so, I have a horse which will carry you."

"Do you mean Gilderoy?" interrupted Agatha Seton. "I am sure it requires a good horsewoman to ride him."

"I am not afraid," Mr. Rolfe answered, smiling, "if Miss Vere is not."

"But *do* you ride?" Agatha asked of Nella, with the jealous interest all women seem to feel in a possible rival in this especial accomplishment.

Derrick was about to testify eagerly to Nella's equestrian ability, but the latter checked him by a look. "They'll ask me to get on a rocking-horse and exhibit," she said in an undertone. Aloud she answered: "I can sit on a horse without holding on by my pommels."

Miss Seton looked relieved. "Any duffer—I mean most people can hack about the roads," she said. "I suppose you'll see them throw off, and then go home; in which case you may as well ride Morpheus, the Shetland

—he is very quiet—and Mr. Rolfe will not be deprived of his day's hunting." For Agatha could not brook the notion of any other woman riding so handsome a horse as Gilderoy, nor the idea of the interest in Nella's movements which would probably be felt by Gilderoy's owner. "He won't be able to keep away from her all day; he'll be so miserable," she complained to Miss Carnegie.

The latter opened her stupid, handsome eyes—"About her?"

"About his horse's legs," snapped back her friend. "And men are like young colts; if one comes and stares at you, the other follows and stares over his comrade's shoulder. Derrick Erle will be added to her train."

"And so will miss seeing you take your fences?" queried Miss Carnegie.

"And so will miss noticing your new habit," retorted her friend; for the pair were sufficiently intimate to be able to enjoy the comfort of being candidly spiteful.

"I have another hunter here which I shall ride to-morrow," Mr. Rolfe explained to Nella. "Pray honour me by making use of Gilderoy, unless you are nervous; he is a little hot and tender-mouthed, but a true gentleman at heart."

Nella hesitated—pride struggling with fear. She felt sick with anticipation, thinking of the pleasing horrors of the morrow; a strange horse, and the necessity of going fast over all sorts of yawning up-rearing obstacles. But had she not done dire battles with her brothers in her youth? had she not submitted to the most painful injuries rather than be stigmatised as a "tell-tale-tit," or, worse still, a "coward?" Since then she had grown to womanhood, and love had ripened in her a woman's heart, but something of the old child-like, fresh, brave life made her feel that if they were both boys it would be a point of honour with her to hit "Seton" between the eyes.

"I will ride your horse with pleasure," she said, in answer to Mr. Rolfe, and Derrick looked vexed, and sulked with her because he was not able to offer her his own mare. However, he found an opportunity of whispering a few words before the party broke up for the night.

"Darling, how do you like my mother? Is she not



nice?" Nella looked doubtful. "I am sure she was very kind in her manner," he insisted.

"I have heard that crocodiles are very ladylike creatures," muttered his rebellious love. Then she wept a few tears of temper and anger. "Oh, Derrick, I think they ha-ate me!"

Derrick kissed her tears away with one of those looks which is a caress. "My mother must love you when she knows that I do," he said, with a touch of that superb obtuseness which made George II. write to his wife, 'you will love the Walmoden because she loves me.'"

The party dispersed for the night. The men retired to the smoking room, glad to be freed of the restraint of dress-coats, dress-shoes, and select language. The ladies congregated in Mrs. Alymer's dressing-room, but, unlike their brethren, they did not venture to appear *en déshabillé*, and were more than usually rigid in their moral theories. In genial moments a man often casts off the armour of appearances, and breathes at ease; the women are generally consistent in their insincerity, if in nothing else.

"Do you suppose her hair is her own?" Miss Carnegie asked, twisting tenderly with her fingers one of her most expensive curls.

"Walter Rolfe seems to like her," Nest said softly, for this amiable woman was never above enjoying other women's discomfiture, even when she shared it.

Meanwhile Nella prayed by her bedside—a mass of brown hair crumpled about her upturned throat, her hands clasped in entreaty—

"Master of souls, bless and purify those that are dear to me."

The moonbeams blanched a happy sleeping face that night, for she dreamed of her lover, and in the dream she had no rivals, and he had no mother.





## CHAPTER XIX.

### A RUN FROM WILLOWWOOD.

**T**HE next morning dawned with a soft, rain-scented wind. "If we find we are sure of a run," Miss Seton said gleefully, as she tapped her cutting whip against the window-pane of Mrs. Alymer's breakfast-room—an observation which was repaid with a thrill of dislike from one or two of her hearers, who did not wish to be sure of anything of the sort. Walter Rolfe, for instance, was feeling demoralised by that smoking-room séance the previous night. He took a cup of coffee with shaking hand.

"Not fit to go a yard," he muttered; "my head feels as if it were a windmill."

Nella, too, was depressed. She glanced at the other women to see if they looked as pale as she felt herself to be. She saw no variation from the rosy tints of the previous evening. Nest's cheeks were even more blooming than usual. That judicious artist always made allowances for the effect the open-air ought to produce on her face if it did not.

"The horses are coming round," Derrick said. Nella gave a nervous shudder. Then looked out with a gleam of hope. There was one horse in the group, a small cob, with a mane like a truculent scrubbing-brush, perhaps that was Gilderoy. She hoped it was; he was less dissimilar to her Shetland pony than the others.

"There is Gilderoy, Miss Vere," Walter Rolfe said,

pointing to a large chestnut horse that was coming edgeways round a corner. "What do you think of him?"

Nella looked at him with dismay. "He is very nice, of course, but isn't he rather a long way off the ground? I mean in case of a fall, you know."

"Fall!" Mr. Rolfe cried, opening his eyes; "he can't fall. That is why I have put you on him. You should have had my cob there, but the fences are very blind, and I thought a big jumper would be safer for you."

A big jumper! A vague regret came over Nella's mind that she had never made a will, and that Derrick's love-letters, dead flowers, and trinkets might fall into unappreciative hands.

Miss Seton seemed provokingly cheerful, as she flitted about the room, looking more like an impertinent toy terrier than ever. No veil obscured her clean-cut little face; her whole appearance was uncompromising. To look at her made nervous men wrathful, and hard-goers cosy in their minds. "If women will hunt, confound them, let them be as she," the latter said. If it rained, she needed not to accept any man's reluctantly offered mackintosh, for her own light grey jacket was water-proof. If her hat took flight from her head, it never went farther than her horse's shoulder, thanks to a controlling piece of elastic. If she wanted sherry, her flask was never left at home. Quiet, swift, and sure, she shot from fence to fence like a noiseless arrow. She wanted no lead, but never overrode man, horse, or hound. She had but one failing in the field, it was jealousy of her own sex. The very flutter of a habit in her vicinity made her settle her hands, and sit down in her saddle with ominous decision. Brave, self-possessed, and tactful, she was a formidable, but a pleasant rival to men in the hunting-field—to women at most times she was formidable and unpleasant. She was as malicious as an ape. Hers was not a high order of intelligence, but she was deft-minded, and dropped spiteful sayings as easily as the evil princes disgorged toads—a short, snappy mode of speaking gave her words the force of epigram. Nella felt uncomfortable whenever the angular-looking lady approached her. Miss Seton

looked at her with an uncanny sparkle in her dark eyes.

"You will excuse me, Miss Vere, but your skirt is hardly short enough for safety; if you had a fall you might be dragged some distance."

"It is no longer than Miss Carnegie's," Nella said, looking piteously at the long blue folds of one of Wolmerhausen's prettiest habits which the beauty was wearing.

"Oh, it's all very well for Nellie Carnegie, who doesn't pretend to leave the road, and who only comes out to be looked at, but I fancied from your wishing to ride such a horse as Gilderoy you had some idea of going straight."

"I don't come out to be looked at, and if I did it would be labour lost, for the men are so occupied with themselves (selfish creatures) on a hunting morning that they never think of anything but their own top-boots. I wouldn't go out only it's so dull at home; and, after all, the moiety of a man's attentions is better than no attentions at all," grumbled Miss Carnegie, *sotto voce*.

"And your hat," persisted Nella's tormentor, "wouldn't save your head a bit."

"It is to be hoped that my hair would," Nella said demurely, touching a thick coronal of her burnished tresses; "mine at least cannot part company with my head."

Miss Seton looked disconcerted, and involuntarily smoothed her chignon to test its security, while Miss Carnegie stole a satisfied look at an adjacent mirror.

"They match to perfection," she thought, "and look much tidier than that girl's rough natural braids. I hate nature; she's never to be depended on—red uncertain cheeks, eyebrows that get rubbed the wrong way, noses that grow rebellious over a luncheon-table, hair that looks as if it had been used for a duster. Those are the results of not 'painting the lily.'"

The party now adjourned to the hall door; faint gleams of sunshine played on the stone balustrades, and on the vivid red coats of the men, and the dense blue of the ladies' habits. The scene was thoroughly charming and English; along the drive, occasionally obscured by the

thin shadows of the leafless boughs, linked by glistening spider-threads, were the horses, their movements showing fragments of glossy light. Derrick, with his broad chest swaying lightly above the elastic grip his loins and thighs held of his horse, was as favourable a specimen of a young Englishman as Mr. Alymer was of an old one. I have a strong prejudice enough in favour of the youngster of my race, believing physical activity to be the foundation of all national success, but my faith is even larger in our elders. Here was Mr. Alymer, on the arid side of his life, looking as vigorous as any sapling there. His bronzed cheeks showed touches of hard winds and hot sun; his firm gait told of exercise over stubble and moor, while in a "quick thing" to hounds no bold-hearted lad ever showed his curly poll in front of that grey one.

"My dear," Mr. Alymer said coming up to Nella, "you have not been in the habit of hunting have you? Would it not be wiser of you to ride to the meet on one of my shooting ponies? Gilderoy is a very fine horse, but he wants a little 'letting alone'—an art rare with the young. If you fuss him you may have a troublesome ride."

Miss Seton overheard him. "It's a perfect waste," she cried, "for any one to ride Gilderoy who is not going to give him his head. Would you like to exchange with me, Miss Vere?"

Nella, who had been somewhat inclined to accept her host's kindly offer, felt the old boyish feeling rising again. "Seton must be taken down," even though she, Nella, suffered infinite terror and discomfort in the effort.

"I prefer to keep my horse," she said coldly. "I think he is much the handsomest here, and I suppose the best, or you would not want to ride him."

She thanked Mr. Alymer, and that gentleman looked relieved at the way in which she took up her reins. "I begin to think you will do," he said smiling, "and after all Miss Vere, riding a Shetland is no bad preparative for going across country. If you can sit their crawling down and clawing up method on a bank, their buckling jumps, and their desperate little jerky gallops, you will enjoy Gilderoy's swinging action."

Gilderoy now drew near. His master eyeing him

affectionately, said, "He sometimes kicks a bit at first starting, but it is only his play, Miss Vere." Whereat Miss Vere's foot halted visibly on its way to Mr. Rolfe's hand, but he did not notice it, and sped her up to her saddle. Derrick sulked in the distance. A slight recurrence of jealousy had prevented his offering to take Mr. Rolfe's place, but he felt as injured as though he had proposed to do so and been snubbed, so trotted away with a supercilious chin and a dejected heart.

"Walter," Nest cried sharply, "am I to drive you to the meet or not?"

Nest, in a dress which was of the colour and lightness of violet clouds, was sitting at ease in an open barouche. She liked driving to meet; it amused her to watch the variety of discomfort expressed by people's faces, while she herself felt so comfortable. Presently she would drive home, half-closing her eyes, while she basked in the sun and tasted with her lips the soft sweet breath of air. Then she would have a comfortable luncheon, and think with a shudder of the greasy compounds of meat, butter, and bread pressed in Miss Seton's sandwich box.

Walter Rolfe's groom approached Nella with a confidential air. "You'll excuse me, 'm, but you see I know the 'orse and you don't, will you allow me to put you up to a few of his ways?"

"Pray tell me anything likely to be of use to me," Nella said earnestly.

"You must ease his 'ead at starting, or likely as not he'll put you off. You must on no account hurge him at a fence or he'll stop dead, but you mustn't 'old 'im or he'll pull you over his head. If he goes like a lion at a place you thinks nasty, don't try and stop 'im, 'cos it won't be no good—perhaps he won't like it 'imself, in which case you'll walk away quite happy."

"But supposing the nasty brute, the horse I mean—does like it?" suggested his rider.

"In which case, 'm" said the groom with a benevolent grin, "he'll give you a *beautiful* feel! Ah, he's a rare fine fencer—timber and water. Nothing comes amiss to him. Hopes you'll have a pleasant ride, miss."

Nella hoped so too, in a rather faint voice, and moved

away, feeling extremely obliged to Gilderoy for the temporary quiescence of his hind quarters. Contrary to expectation, Gilderoy did not kick; perhaps he was surprised out of his usual habit by his unusual burthen. Perhaps he was pleased, as many horses are, to miss the grip of a man's legs. For the present he carried his ears and tail as kindly as possible. He was, as his owner boasted, a grand horse, with a temper as like a woman's as possible. Pretend not to want anything of him, and he was content to grant it; ask him gently, he became coy; roughly, and you developed an under-current of indomitable obstinacy. His sire had been a thoroughbred horse, one of those ne'er-do-wells in horse-flesh, who might have done anything he liked, only he did not like. From him Gilderoy had inherited his lean inquisitive head, and somewhat ill-tempered eye. From his dam, an Irish hunter, came a power of endurance and of courage, which went far to contract symptoms indicated by those dis-obliging orbs. Nella looked down on him with mingled admiration and fear. She must feel like an innocuous fly to him, she thought; he could have carried a Goliath on his mighty back and loins. She peered curiously at the noble slope of his shoulders, with their sleek-rippled breadth and fine ridges; they looked like highly-wrought powerful iron machines. She half expected that such large muscular arms and straight legs would move with the force and rigidity of sledge-hammers, but found herself lifted by the most cat-like and elastic motion possible. Afraid to disturb their mutual peace, Nella did her best to try and make him forget her existence, and Gilderoy, being in a meditative mood, knitted his ears together and abstracted himself from his society, taking no heed even of the erratic movements of Perola, Miss Carnegie's flighty park hack. Gilderoy looked like a horse that had a mission, and knew it. Poor Perola, on the contrary, had the air of a sham. Naturally good-tempered, her life was spent in an exhibition of irritation. Miss Carnegie never considered that her figure was done justice to unless her horse seemed to have as many legs as a centipede. Miss Carnegie was looking more than usually handsome to-day. Seeking some one on whom to impress this fact,

her eyes fell on Derrick Erle, who was trotting on a little in advance of the others. She did not care much for boys, but a boy was better than an old married man. So she used the little spur kept for Perola's torment, and the latter, giving a bound and a caper, overtook Mr. Erle. He did not care for her great grey eyes, nor for her carefully-modelled figure—a triumph of the tailor's art. People talk of being "caught at a rebound," but it is to be doubted whether a man is ever so indifferent to the charms of the many as when he is suffering heart-pain for the one; but not seeing her lover's indifferent gaze, Nella felt indignant and injured. The pair looked intimate as they rode near each other in narrow wood paths. Yes, and he was actually re-adjusting her twisted reins. Each careless touch his hand gave hers seemed to send so many red-hot pincers into Nella's heart. For the first time in her life she knew the bitter foretaste of jealousy. She felt that much of such pain would rend her life into shreds. She sickened at its mere hint, and longed to be back among the Vere woods, with no deeper shadow about her than that of the thronging leaves. Her nervousness died away in her resentment, and one good result of Miss Carnegie's manner was that Nella arrived at the meet feeling several degrees less shivered than when she started.

The quiet grey street of Willowwood village was bright with colour, and loud with tramp and voice. The hounds, clustering near a sunny wall, sat in various attitudes of repose and contemplation. Loyalty, a veteran matron of the pack, has a mild, even a pious, expression in her upturned face. Harlequin, a gay young gentleman, not many seasons old, plays the popular with his tail, and gives a jaunty greeting to such of his friends as have bits of bread in their pockets. Wizard, a pensive hound, with a lean anxious-looking head, stretches his chin along the ground, seemingly oppressed by mental problems. There was no lust of blood in their mild searching gaze—they had the air of detectives in plain clothes. Had it not been for their wicked-looking muscular bodies, you would have said they did not know what thief-taking was. Presently there was a stir, the hounds roused them-



selves up, and threaded their way to the van of a straggling, eager procession. Gilderoy pricked his ears, and quickened his pace. Derrick ranged himself by Nella's side.

"Why don't you ride with Miss Carnegie?" gulped Nella, with tones rendered uneven by Gilderoy's ambling movement.

"She takes up too much room," grumbled her lover.

"And why did you let Walter Rolfe put you up?"

"Because I'm not an acrobat, and couldn't vault into my saddle unassisted."

It takes very few words to make two young fools happy. The pair rode forward with bright faces. Walter Rolfe came up—his cob in a state of furious indignation.

"He's always suspecting me of the most pusillanimous intentions," laughed Walter, "and is desperately anxious to take the matter out of my hands by charging every fence he sees. Hallo! here we are! and there's the Squire making for his point."

"Where is the best place to go?" Nella asked timidly. The hounds had dashed into covert, and the field was dispersing into various groups.

"When one is feeling like a bunch of dead leaves," Mr. Rolfe gasped between interludes of flask sipping, "the best point to make is for the hounds' sterns; for if they once get away from you, and you lose the stimulant of view and voice, your heart seems to grow smaller at every fence. Here goes!" and the cob crashed impetuously into the wood.

"Don't go there, Miss Vere," urged Derrick; "you may get your face cut about."

But Gilderoy chose to follow his stable companion. Nella tried to suggest a different proceeding, but he shook his head and contracted his back; so had his own way.

Mr. Rolfe held up his hand.

"Wait!" he said.

The wood was loud with sharp, quick cries. The huntsman's cheer, the crack of the whips, the yelp of a rated hound (Harlequin to wit, who carried his volatility into business hours), the encouragement to trusty Loyalty—all these aroused a thrill of echoes.

Suddenly, to the wonderment of the novice on the

chestnut horse, a dead silence possessed the pack. They were spreading out in front of her with hurrying noses; some, taking rapid note of briars or twigs, but the majority with their heads well down and their sterns waving; there was a whimpering from Loyalty; it was as though she was whispering "I think, I think!" Presently her manner grew more intense, and she spoke plainly "I'm sure! I'm sure!" Like an electric thrill, the echo of her challenge shrilled from tongue to tongue.

Nella was wondering why they looked as if a sudden wind had stirred up ridges on their backs, and why their tails grew so still and stiff, when they threw up their heads with a blare of music, and flashed out of the covert to the tune of their own delight, their huntsman's horn, and his cheery "Forrad! Forrad away!"

Facts now became very indistinct to Nella. She was conscious of the rapid disappearance of Mr. Rolfe and his cob; she felt her face stung by the boughs and growers through which Gilderoy crashed. And then she was clear of the wood, in a ploughed field. A dark speck was flying in front of her; it was either a colossal crow or tiny Miss Seton. There was a broad white band flaming down the furrows; it had an intermittent voice, so she knew that it represented the pack. The field was shaken like a pack of cards caught by the wind; riders making fast for the roads hallooed "hark forrad!" with disinterested zeal; men going straight to the hounds were silent and few. There was an ugly fence at the end of the field—a steep bank, narrow and rotten, slippery with old stumps, and pierced with rabbit-holes. Walter Rolfe's cob hurled himself on to and away from the untrustworthy region with such dexterity as to save a mistake. Miss Seton's bird-like eye detected a gap, and she made for it with an air of unswerving determination which deluded far-off spectators.

Derrick Erle swung down in Nella's vicinity. "Follow me!" he cried, making for the soundest spot he could see.

"Of course I would if I could," Nella cried ruefully.

But Gilderoy was striding towards his stable companion  
*the cob.*

Nella asked herself if it were not all some wild unpleasant dream. In the distant roadstead a blue figure caracolled, and a mauve one sat in a placid-looking vehicle; alongside her were flying red specks. Everything was gone mad. The wind smote her cheeks to a rosy glow, and loosened the braids about her throat; but she did not heed this. The world had turned into a Catherine wheel, and she was one of its spokes. A great brown shadow loomed before her—another fence. Derrick got over with a scramble. Miss Seton was sailing away on the opposite side. As she neared the fence Miss Vere involuntarily shut her eyes and tightened her hold of her reins. If Gilderoy would take it in a gentle manner it might not feel so dreadful an earthquake. The effect of that constraining rein was electric on the chestnut. With an angry snort he rushed forward. Nella felt a convulsive shock; she could not define what had happened, but it felt as if she were a human pellet being fired off from a pop-gun. Gilderoy had jumped clear of the whole fence, and she was still on his back and in the next field. She took breath and felt happier; if she could sit over one species of fence she could sit over another. Gilderoy was on fire now; he strode the heavy plough with an air of ease which exasperated Miss Seton, in whose face the chestnut occasionally threw small clods of mud.

"Up to eighteen stone, and with that chit on his back, he is bound to kill us all if he goes on long enough," Agatha muttered, with a discontented look at her own labouring mare. Then, as they swept into some green pastures, her bitter mouth grew set and her hands went down. "Water!" she cried, "I wonder if the girl will face that!"

The girl turned a somewhat sickly face towards the nearing sheen of a marshy brook. "It can't feel worse than the other," she thought.

Iris took it in her canter, landing Miss Seton on the off side with plenty of room to spare.

Derrick looked on admiringly. "Splendid!" he cried, as he followed suit. He was only thinking of his mare's exploit; but Miss Seton laughed gaily, and the sound of her exultation was a sharp spur to the girl behind her.

She did not repeat her mistake of taking up her reins, and, consequently, Gilderoy, jumping from nearly a standpoint, bungled at landing. Walter Rolfe went higher up the field where the brink shelved, and half waded, half jumped through.

"I'm obliged to save him when I can," he cried, with an affectionate slap of the cob's neck, "he is so reckless about himself."

The next fence Nella and Mr. Rolfe took simultaneously. They had a wide slushy ditch to them and a steep cut-away bank from them. The cob hurled himself towards it, dug his fore feet well into the summit, and tottered over, slightly top-heavy with his own impetus. The chestnut seemed to regard it as a mole-hill, and did not even sigh a response to the cob's grunt. Miss Seton was delayed by her laudable anxiety to find the smallest place in the fence; but the sight of Nella's retreating skirt made her reckless. She got over safely; but the chestnut was far ahead. A slight check on the part of the hounds brought her up level once more to her companions, and when, with a renewed burst of cheering, the pack streamed away towards the open country, Miss Seton was leading the fast diminishing field once more.

"One begins to live," Walter Rolfe said, with a faint glow on his face and a healthy light in his eyes. He was feeling stout-hearted enough now, and had forgotten the vague horrors of his morning dreams. "What splendid form Gilderoy is in, Miss Vere; he carries you like a bird."

Nella only partially caught the words. A bird?—yes, that's what she was feeling like, only the wings were arbitrary.

Gilderoy's speed was increasing with every stride. White patches of cottages, green squares of meadow, brown lengths of furrow, she was riding a race with them, and she passed them, or they her—which was it? Far off, she saw faint rims of hedges; near to them, and they were great gulfs and thickets, over which Gilderoy would lift her with a mighty bound. Sometimes he varied the process, and would walk down a bank with the utmost caution and deliberation. All was confusing, swift, and,

as it seemed to her, perilous ; for had not Mr. Alymer's mare come down on the top of a staked hedge and not risen up again ? As the pace increased and the fences became more difficult, the specks that had dotted the fields so thickly in the first burst dropped out of the whirlwind of motion. Two men had emerged from the brook, looking like red spiders crooked over the brink ; another instant and they were gone, or Nella was. Anyhow she was in sight of fresh casualties. A man on foot was trying to help a jaded horse out of a ditch, two others were rolling against each other at a fence ; it was the last effort of "craners and thrusters" against a stiff wall of whitethorn, which blocked them as effectually as if it had been made of steel.

"Never knew such a run !" gasped Walter Rolfe, as he collected the cob for a rush. "A thousand guineas shouldn't buy him !" he added, as he landed in the next field in a small and select company, consisting of the pack, the huntsman, and four of the survivors of the field.

Some one asked, "How long have we been going ?"

It seemed to Nella to be hours since the chestnut first broke like a golden flash through the woodland. She heard the answer with a keen sense of amazement.

"Twenty minutes, and straight as a die."

Then came a slight check. The hounds puzzled about in an agony of desire ; they were tired, scratched, and bespattered, but the murder in their hearts kept them keen.

"Not there, Harlequin ! ware heel, you fool !"

Memory, Anarchy, and Wizard are sniffing questions of every grass-blade. Loyalty makes an independent cast ; while, three fields ahead, a tattered looking bundle of fur jumps out of a hedge and looks about it with a ghastly grin—eye, ear, and craft stretched to their utmost subtlety. Five minutes more and he will be at home, will have vanished in the longed-for earth, which lies concealed in the furze on a railway embankment hard by. If only those yelling devils hadn't come such a pace ! They are silent now ; he cheated them finely a few seconds ago in that meadow, by the aid of those foolish sheep !

Ah! Loyalty speaks; she has it! What a fierce chorus of exultation streams down the pasture towards him! Reynard hastily bobs down his last fence; it leads into a deep narrow lane which he runs across, and getting up its opposite side with an effort, finds himself within a field of the embankment. In those bunches of furze is rest and life. He takes heart of hope, and while he speeds on, the pack sparkle down green meadows, thick as the Pleiades on a frosty night. The pace is almost too good to speak about now; even the huntsman's wiry grey has had almost enough of it, and begins to remember a constitutional infirmity in one of his hind legs. Miss Seton's mare, Iris, is blowing a good deal, and its rider thinks she cannot face much more of this, only how can she leave the field clear to that girl? "She would like to ride over her!" she mutters. One more fence to clear, and they will be in the meadow skirting the lane. It is a wide place to jump, and Walter Rolfe makes for a small stile in preference.

"Follow me!" he cried to Nella; "Gilderoy likes timber."

"I don't think Iris can manage it," Derrick says, with an expostulatory glance at Miss Seton; "and there is a weak place in the fence."

But he speaks to deaf ears. The little lady is furious at the notion of her rival topping that stile while she crawls through a gap. Is she, who has shown the way to Lady Plusvite and Miss Coiffless in many a fashionable drag-hunt and in the flying counties, to be out-Heroded by a chit who is having her first day's hunting? "Never," Agatha thinks; "no, not if Iris raps her hind legs off in the effort!" She races for the stile, meaning, if possible, to cut in before Gilderoy. She is indifferent as to whether or no she balks his leap. Nature teems with undeveloped crimes, and in this moment of jealousy and excitement Miss Seton would not have felt particularly repentant had she looked back to see Gilderoy and his rider ending their gallop in a crash in the dust.

Walter Rolfe does not look round; he is making for the hedge that bounds the lane, to see if there is any gate or mode of exit by which he can crawl down into the roa-

way. While he stares over the yawning space, taking note of the line of the hounds, the huntsman slightly checks their onward rush.

"It's nigh on twenty-three feet broad, and deep as a well," he explains to Walter. "A couple of my hounds, running like mad, turned over here and broke their necks last year—it's so plaguy steep."

The two men canter up the side of the fence, for their keen eyes have detected a distant gate. Mr. Rolfe turns round to signal to his friends, but his cheery hail turns into a sharp cry of warning and distress.

"This way! This way! Good God, Miss Vere! Stop him! Turn his head this way!"

Just now the two horses had come down to the stile stride by stride—Iris urged by her mistress, Gilderoy by his excitement. By a bold and dexterous push Agatha had shot over the stile first. Gilderoy, flurried by her proximity, had swerved into the fence. He got through with a scramble.

"Why did you not follow 'my lead?'" Miss Seton cried, looking back, with an insolent nod of her head. "You should have kept his head straight."

"The little vixen!" muttered Derrick. "I should like——"

But this threat remained unexpressed, for at the moment that Walter Rolfe began to shout, Derrick turned mute with dismay. Nella saw that Miss Seton was skirting the hedgerow at the top of the field. She did not know the cause nor did she distinctly hear Walter Rolfe's exclamations. She supposed it was something difficult to jump, or Iris would not have been turned away from it. She was disinclined to make any effort to dissuade the chestnut from his straight course; the shrill taunting voice had aroused all the gipsy in her nature—that in-consequent boldness indigenous to most European women, which goes towards making their sons great men.

Derrick Erle found his voice, and shouted aloud, "Nella, turn your horse's head!" She heard this time, heard and understood the agony of his summons, for she was near enough to the fence to see the fringe of the opposite hedge-row, but Gilderoy never slackened his

pace; he had been irritated to fury by the sense of close competition with Iris, and when he passed her after the episode of the stile he was pulling double. The spectators looked on with white, helpless faces.

"Lord help her!" muttered the huntsman. His pack were heard baying about the embankment, but for the instant he was fascinated, held by the horror of the impending tragedy. Presently, whether she were woman or pulp, he would gallop off to his hounds, but not until she were over or——

Walter Rolfe shuddered. "There's no turning him now! Ugh! What a crash there'll be!" Then once more his voice rang out sharp and distinct: "Sit tight, and leave his head alone!" Gilderoy was near the fence now, so near as almost to have seen his mistake had there been time to turn; a faint and involuntary grip of the curb rein seemed to increase his ill-temper to madness. He tore away his head from her hand, and Walter Rolfe's warning came once more in time to prevent her contracting her horse's effort. All his fever of haste did not prevent his selecting a sound place in which to strike his hind legs. Derrick covered his face. That slender swaying form, those peach-tinted cheeks, set about by the warm masses of hair, all the beauties that went to constitute the creature he loved! What might they be presently? He knew the lane; it was full of sharp stones.

"Oh, my love! my love!" he groaned, then dropped his head, babbling words of trouble, paralysed out of all coherent thought or speech.

"It is coming!" Nella breathed to herself faintly through her half-opened mouth. She clenched her knees close about her pommels. The horse rose; her soft tresses, which had been blown down, were lifted by the motion like a rippling pennon. Miss Seton turned her mare's head sharply to avoid an unpleasant sight, and Derrick Erle put spurs to his horse, and galloped frantically round to the gates by which he could cross the lane.





## CHAPTER XX.

Oude lui, konde lui—  
Old folk, cold folk.

**A**LL trembling as she was, Nella turned round when Gilderoy had accomplished one of those grand feats which become history in equine annals, and called out in a distinct, if somewhat shaken voice:

"Why did you not follow my lead, Miss Seton? You should have kept your mare's head straight." Miss Seton turned away sulkily, while Rolfe and the huntsman hurried round to the scene of action.

Gilderoy, with heaving flanks and head released, set to cropping mouthfuls of short grass. Nella, faint and pale, swayed low in her saddle, whilst Derrick, on foot by her side, pressed his face against her hand. He had met her eyes when he first came up, and she had heard his thanksgiving of relief; but now he dared not speak, and his eloquence of love and fear only found expression in that mute caress. Walter Rolfe's emotion was, not unnaturally, diverted by his glory in his horse.

"What a magnificent jump! I thought you were in for a terrible fall, Miss Vere. Luckily you didn't pull him when he rose to it. Look, Erle, he landed quite clear of the fence; he must have covered some two-and-thirty feet. I'll send and have it measured from take-off to landing while his hoof marks are fresh—he is worth his weight in gold!"

Derrick could take no pleasure in eyeing the proofs of Gilderoy's prowess; his thoughts were fixed on what

might have been. "It's a fearful drop" he said with a slight shiver, looking down the almost perpendicular length of bank.

"Yes," Mr. Rolfe cried; "I suppose it would have been a case of broken necks for both. What could tempt you to such a desperate act of courage?"

Nella whispered, "Don't tell any one, but I couldn't help myself."

Walter laughed, and turned a malicious face to Iris's rider: "You never beat that, eh, Miss Seton?"

"It was sheer insanity!" that lady said coldly.

"Ah! but it's one of those splendid feats of insanity one remembers with a jump in one's heart. It is something to have ridden such a horse over such a fence!"

"Other horses have done as much."

"Yes; but not, I think, with ladies on them."

"Almost *any* horse could do it," Miss Seton persisted, with an irritated movement of her whip.

"Then why didn't you put Iris at it?" suggested her tormentor.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Thank Heaven she is going this afternoon!" Lady Dionysia murmured as she watched the riding party coming slowly across the park. Her boy was evidently more infatuated about "*that* woman (what a power of utterance is sometimes expressed by a pronoun!) than ever!" In truth, Derrick's horse seemed glued to Gilderoy's side, as the pair followed in the wake of Miss Seton and Walter Rolfe. The boy regarded her with jealous care; his prize had just now been in peril, and he was more than ever alert to its worth.

"I shall have to offer you my congratulations ere long," Mrs. Alymer said with an amused and meaning glance at the objects which were riveting Lady Dionysia's attention.

"On what? Oh, on my son's receiving his commission. He is to be gazetted to-morrow. It will be a pleasant surprise to him. The only drawback is that his regiment, the 50th Lancers, is stationed in India."

Mrs. Alymer looked curiously at the hard face of the speaker. "On the whole, it is possible for a mother to be more remorseless than a coquette," she thought.

"Why don't she let the lad have his fancy? I dare swear he would not get more tired of Nella Vere than of any other woman." Aloud she said: "Have they—I mean has he any notion how soon he will have to leave you?"

"No; I do not propose to tell him until to-morrow morning; it would be a pity to interfere with the recollection of his day's hunting until after this evening."

Nest scanned Nella's face as the latter drew near the window. Despite her fatigue, Miss Vere looked as bright as a rose swayed in a flurry of breeze and sun.

"She don't know how soon her happiness is to end," thought Nest. "I wish I were seventeen and could once more feel heaven-lifted by such sweet folly. Heigho! Lady Dionysia does not mean to let them say good-bye if she can help it. I have a great mind to give them a chance; two minutes in the corridor would be long enough to enable them to touch their lips to the duet of 'Eternal Constancy.' Bah! as though *that* were possible. Men and nations seem to delight in pledges which nature ordains corruptible."

Nest's friendly intentions were baffled. Lady Dionysia, who was going out for an afternoon's drive, volunteered to escort Miss Vere home. Derrick looked pleased, and Nella made a wry face. She said good-bye to Mrs. Alymer with greater depression than was due to their separation. All her delight in thinking of home and its welcomes was dulled by the notion of sitting by that portentous-looking woman; feeling her poor attire rebuked by those gorgeous robes, her complexion (not improved by that rush in the wind across country) analysed by Lady Dionysia's magnifying gold-rimmed eye. But there was no help for it. Mrs. Alymer's sleek horses were pawing the ground, and Lady Dionysia, assisted by obsequious arms, was mounting the carriage steps. Nella scandalised the well-trained lackeys by hopping up with such bird-like swiftness as defied their ponderous aid. She looked wistfully out of the carriage window as they rolled through lane and hamlet. Here a beggar's brat, grasping its playthings of weeds and poles, stared at them; there a country girl dropped

her pail more slowly in the spring as she eyed their progress.

"I wish I were you," Nella thought of every unconstrained-looking creature she passed. "You think it a fine thing to sit up in a grand carriage, which looks like a great painted fly, and goes like the wind; but it's very stuffy. The moral iceberg by my side calls all heaven's airs 'draughts.' She thought she would even breathe freer in that sulky-looking gipsy tent, wreathed about by low coils of smoke, and lifted by queer swarthy faces. Lady Dionysia pulled up the glass a few inches higher as she passed the encampment. She never cared to be near to the poor, except in print. She spoke but little, and had few bland looks to waste on Nella now that her son was not present to witness them.

Mr. Vere was strolling down his rugged park drive, cigar in mouth, and dogs of all sorts and sizes at his heels, when Mrs. Alymer's carriage came in sight. "Cinderella has come back in her pumpkin!" he exclaimed, and hastily taking flight behind a group of trees, feigned a great interest in the sharp-faced squirrel that stared skywards, perpendicular with the trunk.

But Lady Dionysia's eyes were town-bred. She could be a mole or a spider at will. To-day she particularly wished to see Mr. Vere, so checked the carriage opposite his hiding-place.

"Lady Dionysia has been so kind as to see me home, papa," Nella began with a dejected air; but her face brightened as she caught sight of the dogs violently agitating their tails and converging to the direction of her voice. "Excuse me, but I must go and speak to them. Thank you so much for letting me get out—I mean for letting me come with you," Nella cried, making awkward verbal trips in her haste.

Lady Dionysia wished nothing better than her absence. She looked at the young girl with the expression of one who has taken some noxious burthen to a distance to drop it the better to secure its perpetual remoteness. She summoned Mr. Vere to the carriage door. She wished to exchange a few words with him, she said; would he kindly drive with her for a few minutes? With a si-

and the final renunciation of the end of his cigar, which he had hitherto saved by concealment, Mr. Vere complied with her request.

They had a long conversation; so long that Lady Dionysia ran the risk of being late for dinner—a proof of the importance of the conference in her eyes. When the carriage was bidden to halt, after various gyrations over the unkempt gravel, the lady's face was flushed, Mr. Vere's pale. She was only being moved by excitement, he by suppressed rage.

"They are much too young," she was saying as their dialogue drew to its close, "to be allowed to bind themselves in any way; but we are too old to try and prevent their so binding themselves by any appearance of coercion. 'Postponement' is my motto for these follies."

"As a man, you would have broken in young horses admirably," Mr. Vere said, some admiration mixed with his wrath. "But supposing they turn restive, and—forgive the phrase—kick over the traces."

"My son is not yet twenty-one. If he marries before that age, without his parents' consent, he forfeits his inheritance," the lady replied coldly.

"And if my daughter marries at any time with or without my consent," Mr. Vere murmured *sotto voce*, "she will have no inheritance to forfeit." Aloud he said—"I am in no haste for Nella to marry; when she does so—you must excuse me, Lady Dionysia, but I shall look high for my daughter."

Lady Dionysia bowed haughtily. "Then you will not at present sanction any engagement between them?"

"I shall tell Nella that in my opinion she could do better," Mr. Vere said, with exasperating impertinence.

He sent a curse after the departing carriage. "The insolent old harridan! to come here and depreciate one's own flesh and blood! I thought myself a poor man when Ritter Bann wasn't good enough to get backed for a crown, but now I know what a pauper I am."

He walked up and down, absorbed by moody reflections. "To think Nella should have grown up like this; it is monstrous of her! Only yesterday she was a child, no symptoms of strawberry-jam on the face. Nella

marriageable! Nella at the altar! I can't realize it. She would seem to me like a doll-bride playing at matrimony."

As he reflected on the manifold inconveniences of his children's growing up inflicted on him, he dubbed himself unfortunate, and them undutiful. His sons' demands for pocket-money increased with their years; their long legs had periodical races with their trousers, and beat them by a length of grey socks. Gilbert wanted to take away his father's money, spent on high-class cigars and West-end betting clubs, to lavish on short pipes and low gambling hells. Max was abstemious enough, and rigid in his morals—too much so for Mr. Vere's comfort. His youngest son was very like the late Mrs. Vere; at times the straight glance of his severe blue eyes startled his sire with unpleasant reminiscences. Rather than allow Max ever to know of that immoral absorption of Nella's portion, Mr. Vere felt he would make great sacrifices, that is to say, he would sacrifice Nella. She need not marry unless it were some one rich enough, and good-natured enough, to condone her father's "bad luck," or sufficiently patient to await for it to turn. That his fortune would mend, and then he would repay her, "down to the uttermost farthing," he never doubted. The gambler is generally the soul of honour—in theory.

Mr. Vere carried his meditations far into the night. He would speak to Nella to-morrow, and put an end to all this folly. When as a child she clamoured for forbidden dainties, she had been told "not to bother;" if she persisted, she was slapped—a forcible and efficacious argument which rarely failed of its effect. She had never hitherto openly disputed his authority, and, of course, she would resign Derrick Erle; sulkily, perhaps, as though he were a disputed sweetmeat, but still obediently. This particular dainty was grudged her by Lady Dionysia, and her indulgence in it would be very inconvenient to her father. At all events, she must put it off for the present. He had become dexterous in postponements, thanks to his large practice with creditors, and could see no reason why his daughter's affections should not be renewable at will "six months hence." When he went to bed, the cold pur-

square of night, visible through his open shutter, became troubled by his thoughts. In his dreams the moon there grinning at him with its mouth askew, turned into a derisive Lady Dionysia. "I have got bags of gold to fling in your yellow face," he thought. "The Ritter Bann has won me a hundred thousand pounds, and Nella is an heiress."

"There's a letter for you, papa," Nella said the next morning, with an absent manner, and one hand making involuntary experiments with her ribbon. Her thoughts had been far away from home for some time past, but none had cared for her enough to resent the inattention of eye and ear.

Mr. Vere read and turned pale; apostrophised heaven in proof of his concern, and hastily ordered a vehicle to be got ready to take him to the train. He forgot all about his daughter, and her inconvenient fancy—forgot the implied pledge Lady Dionysia had wrung from him. His thoughts were entirely occupied by an unwholesome-looking piece of paper he held in his hand; he read and re-read the scrawled sentences with painful interest.

"What is it, papa—are the boys ill?" Nella asked anxiously.

"Worse than that!" Mr. Vere made answer in his haste, as he rushed from the room; "the Ritter Bann has sprung a curb!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Her father insists that there should be no pledge between you. You are both of you too young to love with judgment. By-and-by you may see some one else you love better," Lady Dionysia told her son.

"Never!" he said with energy. "Never should he care for any other woman."

Nest, who overheard thus much of the conversation, smiled slightly. "The human heart is an elastic fabric, patented thus for the benefit of widows and widowers," she murmured, and moved away. She did not care to stay and listen to fables. If a man said he loved herself, she scarcely believed him; if he said he loved another, she was politely incredulous. No doubt Derrick thought what he said, but there was no Enone without a Helen.

"Mother," pursued Derrick, affectionately taking Lady Dionysia's hand, "you gave me the first toy I ever pined for, a gold watch—to be sure I broke it the next day, but that was not your fault—now that my heart is set upon this girl, won't you help me to win her? Cannot we marry at once?"

His mother shook her head. "Your trustees will not permit it; besides, her father thinks it is unfair to her not to allow her a little more time for selection. Surely, Derrick, you are not afraid to trust each other?"

"No!" he cried with fire. "If life were eternity they could be sure of each other's constancy."

"Then why not wait until your return? You will be able to get leave in two years' time, then you can come back and claim her."

"Two years! that's a fearful time to wait."

"My dear boy, you will only be two-and-twenty then, surely that's young enough to marry at?"

"One can't be happy too soon."

The mother temporised.

"If after twelve months' absence you and Miss Vere still love each other, you can then make your engagement formal; at any rate, until you are of age you cannot defy your father. If you did so, you would not be in a position to marry a poor man's daughter. Be patient, Derrick. Suppose you met some girl fairer and more accomplished than Miss Vere?"

"That would be impossible," Derrick said decisively.

Lady Dionysia sighed.

"Miss Rosa Inglis sings and plays, embroiders exquisitely, is a pious churchwoman, and will have ten thousand a year."

"How old is she, mother?" Derrick asked with twinkling eyes.

Lady Dionysia confessed that Miss Inglis was only ten years of age.

"I thought as much," her son said, laughing. "You have frequently selected numberless brides for me among the budding aristocracy, but directly they grow up you find some defect that mars the whole arrangement. Where



Miss Inglis is marriageable you won't like her any better than the others."

"I should like her better than this one," slipped involuntarily from Lady Dionysia's gloomy mouth.

"You would dislike her ten thousand pounds per annum less; that is all the difference. Oh, mother, this girl is my fancy, no money could buy the prize of my longing!"

She soothed him with promises and cajolements. Everything should be well; he must trust to her. She would convince his father, and coax Mr. Vere into reconsidering his wishes, only he must give his word that he would take no important step without consulting her. The two exchanged pledges, greatly to Lady Dionysia's satisfaction, for as she observed, "He is sure to keep his, but I need not keep mine."

The day passed away in discussions of plans and packing of portmanteaus. Derrick would have felt more disconsolate had he not been occupied by the bustle of departure. It is possible to drop a rapid tear on the boot you are wrapping up, and to carry your desperation of heart into your method of folding coats, but the feeling is necessarily fleet as the movement. It was not until evening that Derrick's mind abstracted itself from its petty interests to the consideration of the pang he was soon to inflict on Nella and himself. In the evening he went up to his hostess.

"I shall have to obtain your pardon before I leave you," he said softly.

Nest gave him an eloquent look, but was otherwise silent, not being quite certain to what he referred.

"My brutal, ungentleman-like conduct that night on the terrace. Can you forgive me?"

"A woman can forgive anything excepting being reminded that she has anything to forgive," smiled Nest. "But I do forgive you, even for running away," she added, in a less bantering tone. "Don't be cheated out of your love, Mr. Erle; remember that a man can but enjoy a few great wishes. There is a power of happiness in you now, which age and the world will corrupt."

"Thank you," he said softly, and bent down to kiss her hand. "I am going now to bid her good-bye."

Nest looked pensively out of the window as his form disappeared in the darkness.


"I've got beyond that," she thought sadly. "I couldn't feel happy with a man in a high wind, with the rain washing the powder off my nose. So to-night ends the first act of their little drama, and Lady Dionysia drops the curtain. No doubt they think it hard to say farewell, but the greeting again is the rub, it is passion's sharpest test."





## CHAPTER XXI.

AE FOND KISS BEFORE WE SEVER.

“OME out, darling!”

Through the dismal sob of the wind and rain Nella heard a voice which set her cheeks aflame. She pressed her face to the window-pane and looked out. Yes, it was he; his face, pale in the gloom, and set in a whirl of yellow leaves.

“Come out, darling. You must. I must speak to you! Can you hear me? I am out of breath, running so fast to get to you! Come quickly! When shall I ask it again? If you don't come you'll be sorry, so sorry to-morrow.”

His face was quite close to her now, their breaths only divided by that cold sheet of glass. She opened the window gently.

“I want to take the chill off,” he murmured, and for an instant their lips touched in greeting.

“I don't think I dare,” Nella said, with a nervous glance behind her. Old Martha was crooning a hymn in the kitchen. No one was alert but herself, but her nervous imagination gifted Martha with a traditional activity. The latter used to have an acute ear for the removal of a jam-pot lid, and Nella never did any contraband action without a wholesome terror of her old nurse's ubiquity. She stood hesitating on the window-ledge, cold and fear making her somewhat cross. “I can't come, Derrick. Oh-h, how the wind blows! I can hear you quite well where I am.”

"No, you can't," he said decidedly, and he lifted her down, partially closing the window after her. Then he drew her under the shelter of the old tool house, and talked with a fire which took the chill off the hour.

"Nella, I have bad news!"

"What is it—is any one ill?" she asked, her distress not yet risen to the level of his.

"Dear, it is worse than death to me! I am to go away. I am to join to-morrow, and " (here came a little break in his voice) "to sail for India in a few days!"

She caught hold of his hand, and clung to it.

"Going to India!" she echoed. The first effect of a heavy shock to the young is to blind them with the surprise of its weight. It is only the old who hear with heart-sick facility the full resonance of a grief. Dumbly, as an animal coaxes a hurt friend, the girl pressed up to him, and caressed him; but he was too wretched even to kiss her—his whole soul was wrecked with grief.

"To go away," he iterated; "to put seas between us. Never to hear you speak, or see your face. I've known what it is to feel sick with the want of you." Then the moon, escaping from a pursuit of clouds, showed how pale she was, and he cursed himself for his selfishness, and knelt by her side, his arms about her, begging her to forgive him. "And you'll be true to me, won't you, dear? Swear you'll be true to me. Hang that fellow, Smyth! but I won't think of him, only of you, my own. Shall I ever suffer again as I do now?"

"You won't miss me so much in a day or two," she said sadly. "Do you remember when you went away to London how amused you were by the play and the park, and forgot to write to me? All that time I was watching the path where we used to walk, or reading some book you had marked. You will be away from me every hour of your new life, but I shan't be absent from you, because I can't get away from myself."

"Do you wish to do so?" he said jealously.

She shook her head.

"You have made my life so beautiful! You were the first who cared to look at or touch me with love in your face. Do you remember the day you first kissed me?"

My heart trembles whenever I remember it. It was a moment borrowed from another and a sweeter world. Don't you forget it, Derrick!" She twined her arms about him, weeping, "I cannot bear it. Oh, Derrick! to wake up in the morning, and know you are gone!"

"There shall be no morning when I don't think of you," he said earnestly. "Don't cry so, dear! I mean to get on well in my profession, and come back, and marry you, and we'll be so happy! I mustn't ask for any promises after that one I've made your father and my mother. It was very cruel of them. They meant well, but if they were but younger, they'd know what pain this is. I won't bind you in any way; but I shall never alter—never! and if you still care for me when I come back, two years hence——"

"Care for you! Oh, Derrick!"

The two young faces clung together. It was "good-bye;" they knew that; although they could not bring their lips to utter the word. Their arms tightened about each other with the anguish of the thought. It was good-bye—good-bye to the dark night, with its wind, rain, and its bitter-sweet caresses. It was all passing so quickly. Time was sweeping them down his tide, and was unloosing the passionate clench of their embrace.

"I have been so selfish," he murmured. "But this was my last chance of seeing you in private. I could not have gone without a kiss from you; my lips would have been hungering for their blessing all the voyage out."

"Shall you keep your lips for me until we meet again, Derrick?"

He laughed with the scorn of inexperience.

"I would not touch any others if they prayed me to do so," he said. "I did once. I didn't tell you, love; but it was nothing; your greeting wiped it away. No one shall soil your farewell touch. There'd be no soul in my mouth for any other woman. It is my heart which burns against your lips now; my heart can't burn for mere flesh and blood. How I shall think of you to-morrow night! How soft your hair is, Nella. I shall take a piece; I brought a pair of scissors on purpose." Quick as the words, he cut off a long tress. "It shall be my charm,"

he said ; then set to kissing the wounded remnant, as in tender pity for the wrong he had done. "I have tried so to work and keep straight since I have loved you, and now I shall have only the memory of you to cheer me ; but I shall come back, and until then, pray for me sometimes, darling."

"Yes."

"You are mine, you know. Our parents say No, but our hearts have said Yes, yes, yes ; and we'll see if we don't tire that ugly word out which has come between us, and made such a gash in our lives. It was a pity we couldn't go on being happy ; we mayn't get such a chance again."

"Derrick, my love, don't laugh at me, but I should like——"

"What?"

"Just to say, 'Our Father' with you. It would comfort me."

He bowed his head with hers, and followed the prayer with her. He could not abstract himself from the present as she did, but the words brought a dim sense of comfort to him. In conclusion, she murmured an additional plea for him and for herself—"And please forgive me if I love him too much, and keep him safe from harm."

Her face was still reverential when she turned it again on her lover.

"I have always prayed for you since I have cared for you, dear. When I was little, I used sometimes to forget my prayers when I was very sleepy ; but after I grew so happy—you know when—I did not dare to be ungrateful. Since that, my life has been one blessing ; but now——"

"And now?" he echoed discontentedly, "I may not be back for two years, Nell!"

"Is two years too long to trust in heaven and in each other?"

With his boyish face white and set, he took her hands, and swore such oaths as youth can utter and youth believe. For them time was to stand still at this epoch ; the passion and faith of to-night would endure in them fresh and unchanged through all Time's corruptions.

She listened and took comfort in his hot, eager

words; but there is a note of the Cassandra in every woman.

"If we should never meet again," she said with pathos, "or, if meeting, you shouldn't look at me as you do now, it will be my comfort to remember that you loved me with your best love; for you gave me your first kiss, and you could pray to Heaven with me."

"You don't doubt me?"

"No; but absence is one long doubt."

If they had not faith, they had better give each other up at once, he said, with an access of sullen despair.

She soothed him, and put away her disquiet, even from herself.

"Good-bye, Derrick."

"Good-bye, my own."

"Oh, Derrick, I do believe you're crying. Let me kiss them away."

"They're the first I've ever felt; they smart horribly. But your own poor eyes will be washed out. Let's make an end of it."

"It's time you were home," she sighed; but she still lingered.

"Yes, and I've lots to pack"—which was an anticlimax, but no less true. "I must see you back to the window. Good-bye. Oh—h—

"I shall }  
"I shall } *Never, never change!*"

On that last pledge their lips joined, then parted, but even as he disappeared, and the distance grew between them, hope lessened, and heart-soreness increased. They might look forward to the future, but who was to compensate them for the dull girding of the present? Each said, "I will hope," and each felt chafed to agony by the silence and the vacuum which deepened about them. Yet they scarcely needed pity. It was but the bead-drops, not the drags, of life's bitter draught they were tasting; for, as one had said, they believed in Heaven and each other.

"Derrick is going away!" Through the cold pauses of the night those words came and went with the fitfulness of a smouldering flame. The farmhouse dog in the mist-wrapt homestead would bark at sunrise to the sound of his

departing wheels. The day would come—the passionless, sickly day—which would know his loss. She watched through the night until the hills grew pale. “He is gone!” she thought, with a shudder and a sob, as she leaned by her window.

His mother watched him through the door with a sense of relief. He was to face certain perils of climate and of circumstance; but he was saved for the present—saved from marrying the girl whom he loved, and who might have made life an idyllic joy for him. Nursing her own ambition at his cost, Lady Dionysia banished her son, and called the deed solicitude for his welfare. She wiped a few natural tears from her eyes in the silence that succeeded his departure.

Even Nest gave herself some airs of sentiment. She missed that young and handsome face, as she might have missed something nice to look at or to eat. His loss created for her an additional vapidty. Besides, hitherto he had possessed the interest of an unsolved enigma: he had not fallen in love with her.

“A little more time,” she sighed, “and he couldn’t have helped himself. Poor boy! he meant well; but if a man is constant, it is because no one has tried him sufficiently.”

The party at the Dimes was now broken up. Walter Rolfe claimed the privilege of a private farewell.

“Are you satisfied with your work?” he asked.

“I had very little to do with it; his mother managed it all.”

“But you tried to flirt with him?”

“That was from no ill will to the girl;—it’s an indigenous vice I can’t get over.”

“You’re a worthless little creature, Nest. I wonder why men can be found to care so much for whipt syllabub women.”

“It is not often that a man knows anything of the nature of the woman he loves until he knows that he loves her—then it is too late,” smiled Nest.

Soon her cousin too was gone—with a regretful pressure of the hand, and a tender pause in his eyes.

“I wonder why I am feeling so dull,” mused Nest.



"I don't think it can be the loss of my guests—that might cause me to look out at the sunset, or to play dreary little tunes on the piano, causing, in fact, just so much sentiment as gives piquancy to idleness—but my head aches and my throat is sore. I hope I am not going to be ill."

Meanwhile Nella clutched the gold trinket that hung about her breast, and smoothed the auburn curl that had glistened on his head, trying by giant efforts of imagination to think—"this is yet him, and of him; he is not all gone, while I hold his visible pledge." But a terrible hollowness seemed developed in her life. All was nought, he was gone. His voice might speak, and she know none of its words. She might recall his looks and his touch, but every now and then all these carefully-nursed illusions vanished before the unceasing dumbness of his absence.





## CHAPTER XXII.

### NEST THINKS SHE WILL REPENT.

**N**EST was ill. For some days past she had felt a sickness growing on her, which was a cruel interference with her appreciation of life's pleasures. "Oh," sighed Nest, as with flushed face and heavy head, she pushed away her plate, "I feel what it is to be mortal when I can't eat my dinner." She could not read; her head swam at the effort. Her jewels lay scattered about the room; her clothes huddled on chairs and couches. The long pier glass, which was Nest's Bible, reflected a dull, dishevelled little woman, with loose hair and heavy lids.

When sickness causes us to fall out a space from the bright panorama of healthy life, how lax becomes our interest in all our old pursuits! Newspapers! who cares for the world's chronicle when they are near to making one more name in the *Times* obituary? Food is nauseous, fiction is idle, love is helpless. Give back the old fresh, sweet health, kind Heaven, and we will live as saints and anchorites rather than peril it again; we will cherish our digestive powers and mend our morals.

When Nest felt her indisposition increasing, she locked herself up in her rooms; then from sundry secret drawers and morocco cases she drew out miniature portraits set in lockets, some letters, and a number of square little packets, with dark rings of hair showing dimly through the tissue paper.

"No use to make dear Ben uneasy by leaving them at

a legacy." Here Nest was hardly sincere with herself, for in truth the idea of being found out, even after death, would have been intolerable to her; and here is not the only hypocrisy which goes even to the tombstone.

She burnt the locks of hair and the letters, picked out the miniatures—they looked harmless enough when they were shuffled, locketless, among other photographs. She put away the gold shells which had held them, unlocked the door, and took to her bed with a clear conscience.

The exertion had increased her pain and fever.

"I believe I'm going to be very ill," she said; "and Ben will bring doctors in here without giving me any notice."

Alternately shivering and burning, she tottered across the room, and tried on two different flannel capes. "The pink one is the warmest, 'm," her abigail suggested; but Nest, looking askance at the mirror, decided that bright blue merino "went" best with fever cheeks and chestnut tresses, and staggered back to bed again, prepared for all emergencies.

For some days her illness raged, and gave her the strength of one possessed. Then the storm of the malady died away, leaving fatigue and waste behind it.

"I have been light-headed, haven't I, Ben?" Nest asked, anxiously, in the first moments of regained consciousness.

"Yes, dear."

"What did I talk about?"

"All sorts of nonsense. You said nothing that was coherent."

"You are quite sure, Ben?"

"Yes; stay—excepting once, when, in a gruff voice, as if mimicking some one, you cried, 'Hang it, Nest, what a humbug you are!' So you see you said nothing sensible, dear."

"Would you like to have some of your relatives to see you?" he added tenderly.

"No!" Nest cried, with a flash of impatience. "What is the use? When we are ill only those are necessary to

us who were necessary when we were well. I think it so hard that in this Christian country one can't die comfortably, alone in a thicket, like a wounded savage. So absurd to suppose that when we've done without people all our lives we want them huddling over us when we are going away from the world, trampling and staring like a flock of sheep. I never should want any one, Ben, but you and my maid and the doctor, so mind that. A dying fox won't take to a covert, knowing that breath is scarce, and there's less fresh air there than in the open. I've got the same fancy, for the wide breath of an empty room—when I am fighting the death gasp."

"Just as you like. Everything shall be always just as you like," Mr. Alymer said kindly.

Nest looked at him suspiciously. "People say that when they think one is not likely to take advantage of it for long," she thought. "I wonder if I am in danger?" The idea made her heart stand still.

She did not dare to ask. Besides, all sick nurses are Jesuits, and they were not likely to tell her the truth.

She closed her eyes, and feigned sleep. "With patience I shall learn," she muttered.

Later in the evening the doctor came to her bedside, felt the sleeper's pulse, tapped and smelled a physic bottle mechanically, and walked away, followed by Mr. Alymer. Nest opened her eyes. "Rose," she said to her maid, "fetch me a hot bottle; my feet are cold. Go down the back way, so as not to disturb the gentlemen in the next room."

Rose departed, without noticing the uneasy glitter that showed between the dark fringes of the patient's eyelashes. As soon as she was alone, Nest crawled out of bed. She could not stand at first. She had a dreadful feeling that her legs were cork and her head lead. By degrees, and by the aid of a washhandstand, a chair, and a picture-frame, she managed to creep near the door, which was ajar, of the adjoining room.

With her head drooped by the side of the door, like a peony blossom overweighing a fragile stem, she listened and looked.

The doctor's back was to her, but she could see her husband's face, and saw that it was grave with anxiety.

His white lips began to move, but no sound came from them. The doctor read his question in his eyes.

"How long?" he murmured.

"It is impossible to say—two or three days perhaps; and there may be a rally yet. But I must confess I do not think it probable."

Nest sickened, and nearly fell; but the old instinct was strong on her. She would not be caught eaves-dropping, and with random hands and stumbling feet she reeled back to her bed. Then she turned her face to the wall, and neither looked at nor spoke to any one again for some hours.

She kept her eyes closed when her husband bent over her. She knew that his face looked heart-broken without seeing it. She hoped that he would go into the next room and keep watch there, if he believed her to be sleeping. She wanted to be alone. There are some shocks that we care not to have scanned in our faces, even by the eyes dearest to us.

By-and-by, when her thoughts reassumed coherence, she began to mutter fitful tags of prayer. "O Mighty and Invisible! let me live long enough to repent. Forgive us our trespasses. Oh, there's no time—no time. I shall die.—Shall be dust and ashes, and my sins will wander above in the shape of a condemned spirit!" She thought that if she could live over again, she would put away her follies and her sins.

If she recovered, she would have a last interview with Walter Rolfe, and tell him that henceforth her life must be consecrated to good works. She would meet his reproachful face, with eyes purified by suffering and aspiration. She would sit up in a dark velvet robe, which should show her delicacy of appearance to advantage. He would perhaps ask her for the flowers in her hair, and she would give him a Bible, and exhort him to give up his pernicious habit of drinking, for "Oh, Walter, it will kill you very soon, or make you mad, and then you won't be able to ask pardon; and it's dreadful to think one is going to fall to dust and ashes. My life has been ill

spent. I have cheated Ben, in many little ways. I flirted with you, Walter, in the country, but it was so dull; and I've kept my marriage vow to Ben. I've never loved any one else; to be sure, I've pretended to love many others."

Her fancies became vague and detached. One moment she imagined she was kneeling in shapeless darkness, praying some indefinite power for mercy. Presently her thoughts were earthward again, and she was whirling round in a valse to a gay dance tune. But instead of murmuring tender speeches to her partner, she was singing to time softly, "Let us eat, drink, and sleep, for to-morrow we die."

But how every one admired her at the ball! What if she did step into a funeral car when she left it, and drive away no one knew whither! That word "die" was very often on her lips to-night—it broke on her tangled maze of thought with awful precision. "Oh, dear," she moaned, "I do wish I could feel good; but when one has been feeling wicked for so long it's very difficult."

Mr. Alymer came into the room, and walked up to her bedside.

"Good-night, dear," he said in a cheerful voice.

Nest, who had been trying very hard to feel spiritual, was conscious of a very human glow of resentment.

"How can Ben speak in such a voice," she thought, "when he knows my danger? I am sure I should hate his second wife like poison, if I could only know her."

"I shall sleep more happily to-night," he resumed.

Nest could keep her eyes closed no longer, but flashed an ireful look at him.

"Why?" she asked. Then added instantly, "If she has children, I suppose you'll love her much better than you have loved me. But that's all vanity, you know. Men are fond of their infants because they are so con-ceited they never tire of seeing themselves reproduced. Just wait till you have to pay Master Alymer's bills, and find that you have conceived a perpetual frustration of all your best-laid schemes—something with your own face which is always slapping yours."

"Are you wandering?—I'm afraid you are worse," her husband said anxiously. "I was going to tell you what the doctor said."

"Ah," gasped Nest, "now it's coming. He's going to force the clergyman down my throat. If I can't repent by myself, it's of no use his trying to give me a lead over. Ben, Ben! don't talk to me! I can't bear it. Good night, dear Ben. Go away and pray for me. I'm tired."

"I'll go; but first let me say how happy the doctor's account of you has made me."

"What?" cried Nest.

"To think that you are out of all danger," Mr. Alymer went on, "is to know that I shall wake up with a light heart to-morrow morning, and shan't be afraid of the tick of the clock. Good night, dear."

"Good night," Nest echoed mechanically. "But some one else is ill whom the doctor is attending. Who is it?"

"Old Miss Lane, who lives near the school. Poor soul! she has been ailing for years. She is glad to die, she says. She is so tired of pain, she is ready to go."

"She was very good—was she not?" Nest asked.

"So good," her husband said reverently, "that I think her sister in heaven, who died years since, won't be ashamed to own her."

Nest lay and meditated deeply for some hours after Mr. Alymer quitted the room.

"To think I should have been so frightened and so repentant, and all for nothing!" But in her heart she knew the shock she had received would not be useless—in her heart she vowed to be a sincerer wife and a better woman when she arose from her sick-bed.

She would only see Walter Rolfe once more, and she would try and secure his amendment—that was only right; and she planned her attitude, her dress, and her ornaments. There was nothing heinous in black velvet and a white rose.

She went to sleep with a domestic and comfortable image of herself and Ben sitting alone in the winter's evenings in the country. They should read prayers to

the servants every night. In London it would be difficult, because of the dinner parties, which always interfere sadly with nightly devotions during the season. In fact, they reduce godly people to the unpleasant alternative of sacrificing their religious or social engagements; and of course they can't "cut" their friends, whatever they do to their Creator.







## CHAPTER XXIII.

### AND NEARLY REPENTS OF HER REPENTANCE.

**N**EST convalescent, played at being ill in the most graceful way imaginable. She involuntarily practised a good many new "effects" during the last stages of her indisposition. Her couch; her reading-lamp; the flower-stand, which gave her a delicate tracery of blue hyacinths as a background to her bright-brown hair; the colour of the footstool, that contrasted with her arching slippers; the sigh of the Æolian harp in the window; the reserved air of the deep muslin curtains that swayed by the half-open windows;—all was in harmony with her faint voice and delicately wan cheeks.

On one special day she dressed herself with more than usual care. She was about to make a sacrifice to virtue. She was going to see Walter Rolfe, and tell him that henceforth she would not play at deceiving her husband for the sake of his dog-like devotion, his excellence in tying bouquets, and the pleasant interest his frequent letters gave to the post-bag. It was a sacrifice—one worthy of her prettiest dressing-gown and most graceful air. She was grieved to hurt and mortify Walter, but could not determine to decrease his vexation by looking one whit less charming than usual.

In the afternoon, when Ben Alymer's honest cheeks were taking an extra shade of tan from the harvest sun as he overlooked his men, or strode through his sultry woods to mark what number of pheasants moved the stillness at the

sound of his footsteps ; when Nest was growing sleepy under the influence of the flower-scented air and a volume of sermons—Walter Rolfe's pale face broke the rose-coloured shadows that encompassed her, and his nervous tones jarred the softness of the hour. He came eagerly to her side.

"I have been so unhappy, Nest," he murmured, pressing her hands.

Nest looked uneasy ; that squeeze was an extra debt incurred to her repentance fund.

"I have been very ill, Walter," withdrawing her fingers.

"It has been so dull without you," he said fretfully ; "and so uncomfortable, it felt like leaving off a great-coat in mid-winter."

"You are complimentary," she said, smiling.

"I am," he answered gravely. "When a woman represents comfort to a man, her empire is secure. I never liked any one of my friends' wives half as well as I like you, Nest."

There was a pause. Nest could hardly forbear a glance of gratification at an opposite mirror, but her eyes were arrested by the counteracting sermons.

"My illness made me thoughtful. I was sufficiently near death to begin to consider it time to—to——"

"To hedge," suggested Walter, filling up the pause.

"You speak lightly," Nest said, with a severe look at the sermons. "If you had been as ill as I have, Walter, you would know what repentance feels like."

"Bless you, my dear, I have often been quite as ill. I have had *delirium-tremens* twice. No one could have repented harder than I did, or drank harder when I recovered. When you got ill, I was only sober when the post came in ! I paid you the compliment of wishing to know how you were. I have odd dreams sometimes, Nest. Last night I dreamt I was blown from a gun, and was forced to pick up my own pieces. I couldn't find my left arm anywhere, though. When I woke up, I felt that it was numb."

"You will kill yourself, Walter," Nest cried, much shocked.

"That's what my heir-presumptive says, attempting to seem sorry all the while."

"Well, Walter, I'm going to try and be good."

Walter looked compassionate, and whistled. "Try away," he said softly.

"And I don't think I've behaved well to Ben, who always behaved well to me."

"That was his mistake. He should have maltreated you shamefully, and you would have adored him."

"In future," persisted Nest, "I mean to devote myself to him; to go to church at least once a day; to flirt with no one——"

"Unless they happen to be novelties," Mr. Rolfe interrupted savagely. "Tell the truth, Nest; you are tired of me, and call it repentance."

"I never tire of admiration, and I shall miss you very much," Nest said, with genuine emotion. "You see, Walter, a woman's life is generally haunted by some indefinite need. She is always listening and watching for some one to come. Her household ties are sometimes too uneventful to have any of the charm of those sweet hap-hazard greetings such as come from lovers and children."

"You have allowed me to love you out of pure idleness," he said, with anger. "You have indulged your vagrancy of heart at the expense of my peace. You have taught me to depend on you. You have made yourself responsible for me. Do you call it religion to hand me over to all the devils that assault a lonely man's life? Do you think to ensure your own salvation by damning me, Nest?"

"What can I do?" she said, distressed.

"Do nothing. Don't throw me over," he urged. "I shall be so dull without you. One can't make love to the same woman for years together, without feeling her to be a necessary. I might seek diversion, but I'm past the time of 'falling in love,' as it's called, with any woman: that's a luxury of youth. All women bore me excepting you. It would be years before I could get used to any other. You and laudanum are the comforts of my life, my dear."

"Couldn't you find any one else to pet you and amuse you?" suggested Nest.

"Some one who hasn't come to the repenting stage yet, eh? Thank you. No. I wouldn't have this scene to go over again on any account. You will have confirmed my distrust of the sex, Nest, in future. I shan't believe even in a woman's vices. Do you really mean to part with me, Nest?"

"I would *rather* do so," she said candidly. "I got dreadfully frightened when I was ill. I really want to change, and get a cleaner memory against the last dark hour."

Walter paced the room with agitation, then stopped at her little hand, and kissed it.

"I should miss you so. Think of the long, dull, wet afternoons in London, and the pleasant refuge your house and smile gave me. Fancy not meeting you at those balls which boys go to for the sake of many, and middle-aged men for the sake of one! Fancy the great dreary gap your loss will make in my life! And our pleasant trips together in the autumn! To be sure, Alymer went too; but as I never remembered his existence, he didn't count. And there's another point. Where shall I find another woman's husband as well suited to me as Alymer is? Such a nice fellow; he never bored me. And—do you really think you *must* repent, Nest? Do drop it, there's a good girl, or put it off until the London season; a few weeks more or less won't make much odds. After all, you know, there is so very little to repent of."

"I am sure Ben would not approve of our intimacy. He would not even like you to kiss my hand if he knew."

"Of course I would not have done it if I thought he would know it," urged the casuist. "Have you ever found me uncivil to Alymer, Nest?" Then seeing an obstinate look in her blue eyes, he sighed heavily, and paced the room again, quoting in a low voice—

"Since all is o'er, then let us kiss and part.

Nay, I have done, you get no more of me,  
And I am glad—yea, glad with all my heart,  
That thus so clearly I myself can free."

"Glad no! no—I'm hanged if I am. I am sorry to the heart, Nest. When a man says he's grieved to part with a woman, he may possibly be glad; but if he says he's glad it's 1000 to 1 he's sick with vexation. You've done for me, Nest. I shall either have to indulge in a final fit of D. T. or to marry——"

"Marry whom?" she asked jealously.

"I believe that you, too, prefer the other alternative, as more flattering to your vanity," he said grimly; "but I think I shall give marriage a trial first."

"Whom will you marry?" persisted Nest.

"Any one who will have me—provided she is young, beautiful, easy-tempered, and not in love with me."

"Why the last proviso?"

"If she's in love she can't be easy-tempered. 'Tis a glorious passion, no doubt, but horribly corrosive of amiability."

"You speak of love in a way you never express it," Mrs. Alymer said, in a piqued tone.

"I speak of love's memory. Such a cruel, sweet memory it is. When I was a lad I loved as a man loves once. Many a man has at some time aped the old painters, and transfigured his sweetheart's face into that of a Madonna. My family thought me too good—or rather rich—for her, so they managed to separate us. In the interim, she went to the angels and I went to the devil. On the whole, I think she'll be in better society than mine in the long hereafter. But she won't cut me if she meet me, Nest, for she had a tender face; it couldn't even hint an unkindness."

Mrs. Alymer looked bored. She disliked to be rivalled in any particular. She could not be an angel excepting in *tableaux vivants*. And Walter Rolfe's eyes were for the moment filled with a purer light than tinsel wings or gilt aureoles could reflect.

"Why do you quarrel with me for trying to be good," she cried petulantly, "when you seemed to have liked some one else for that sole quality? I'm sure she must have been a very uninteresting person if her face was always amiable. She could have had no expression."

"We won't talk of her," Mr. Rolfe said, with yet gentle

remembering tones, "but of yourself; that's a subject you'll sympathise with. How will you spend the autumn? Goodness is all very well in the season, but you will find it a very slow amusement without a fashionable West-end chapel in which to air it. I had hoped to have been with you on some of the long golden evenings, Nest."

"I shall go abroad," Mrs. Alymer said shortly.

"Then it is good-bye?"

"Yes."

"What! is a handshake to be the end of it all? What a cheat human friendship must be! To part with you is parting with an existence. Good-bye, then. This touch of your cheek—who will grudge it to me? It is very nearly the first—and most certainly the last. Good, dear little cousin!"

"Good-bye," she echoed, with rather a wistful look, which seemed to be directed to the window, but which, in truth, was seeking the future.

She added, with something like a sob—

"I too shall find it dull without you."

"Poor thing; and she can't revenge herself with taking a husband because she has one already."

"Don't mock me, Walter. Who is it to be?"

"I haven't made up my mind. Shall I write just one more letter to tell you?"

She hesitated. "I certainly should much like to know; but it must be the last letter."

"Trust Mrs. Rolfe for that," Walter said, with a faint gleam of malice; and Nest suddenly felt her renunciation of him to be harder to bear than she anticipated. She fortified herself with an effort, and by the aid of another look at the respectable-looking brown volume that lay upon the French novels on her table.

"I have—nearly determined," Walter pursued. "She is a lovely girl——" an impatient gesture of her hand scattered Mrs. Alymer's books to the ground. She felt desperately inclined to detain Walter, although he was already at the door, which he had hastily opened.

The draught waved the window curtain, and showed a glimpse of Ben Alymer trudging towards the house, his

favourite pointer, Don, in close attendance. A keeper was whistling Don to his kennel. Whereat Don hung more closely to his master's legs. Mr. Alymer, smiling, passed across the lawn, Don's shadow merged in his.

Quick as the sight was the impression made on Nest's prismatic intelligence—

“ Shall I be less true than his dog ? ”

She was silent, and Rolfe, understanding what an ominous symptom silence is in a woman, opened the door wider.

“ Did you get my note this morning ? No ! Oh, well, it was too late for the post. 'Twill come to-morrow, no doubt, and be an old story then. 'Twas full of tender regrets over your illness, and expressions of my longing to see you again. I do not know that your cruel, icy little note, bidding me come for ‘ the last time,’ would have crossed mine. I wrote to Alymer at the same time, about a horse he promised to get for me.”

Mr. Rolfe went downstairs sighing heavily.

“ For the last time—for the last time,” he echoed.

“ What an ugly phrase it is ! ”

He greeted Alymer hastily as they passed each other on the terrace.

“ I'm off to catch the train,” Mr. Rolfe cried. “ You will hear from me in the morning, Alymer.”

But neither to husband nor wife could Mr. Rolfe give a warning to exchange with each other, ere perusal, the contents of their envelopes ; for he was unconscious that his careless fingers had enclosed to Mr. Alymer the note intended for Nest, while to Nest he had forwarded the communication “ about a horse.”





## CHAPTER XXIV.

"HARD HIT."

**T**HE next morning Mr. Alymer awoke, to find his room flooded with sunshine, the noise of birds thick about the ivy that edged his window, and his morning letters lying on a table by his side. He was late, he thought; he must bestir himself; and presently he would be plodding up yonder earthy fields where his ploughs were at work. Declaring that he must rise immediately, he prolonged his inaction, as people belated already are apt to do, and watched the brown sleek sides of his horses as they toiled and turned with their manes and tails tossing in the wind, or marked a pheasant flashing down the roadside. Presently he would rebuke the man who had left the paddock-gate ajar, and would commend another who was breaking an unruly colt with care and judgment. Presently he would go forth into his outer world, a prosperous-looking, prosperous-feeling country gentleman, with a bright steady gaze, and confident, pleasant voice; and gain an appetite for the breakfast over which Nest would preside, her rounded chin obscured by the urn-steam, her pretty eyes sending tender gleams towards him, querying of his requirements.

But first he might as well look over his letters. "Ben, my boy, you must be getting young again, you are so lazy," he said, half aloud, with a laugh. Then opening one envelope, he read a petition for alms. "Poor soul! she shall have it. The widow of a sailor. Perhaps her



heart was broken by a heavy sea." There was another from an old schoolfellow who wished to renew youth in memory by meeting his ancient comrade. "He shall come. What a good-looking fellow he was! I wonder if he's as handsome now. But, bless me! his hair must be white, and his figure like a wind-bent crab-tree."

Whistling a tune he had known in the boyhood, of which he had just been reminded, he went on to open the last letter—opened it and read it with uncomprehending sense. Once more, with his laugh turned to a cry of shrill scorn, and yet again, until each word was branded on eye and heart—with a terrible stupefaction, which gave place to a more terrible sensibility—with his heart turned to stone until pierced by a thrill of agony so keen that he involuntarily recalled the cruel thrust that had gone through his mare's breast the last time he hunted, when she met with that ugly fall on a newly made-up bank. "Staked, by God!" he cried now as he cried then; but then it was his mare who had lain motionless, with pained wondering eyes and heaving sides, while he had helped her and healed her. Now he lay stricken by a blow beyond the power of aid or consolation. He did not move either for awhile, but the rubicund face paled to a death colour, and his breath came and went with suffocating haste. He could not look out of that glad window all aglow with sun, nor listen to the restless movement in the ivy, "Staked—staked to the core!" he moaned; "and by her little hand! How I loved her! how I loved her!"

Talk of the agony of hearing the death psalm read over the ashes of that which was something and was loved! Is it to be compared to the pain of morally burying the living creature we worshipped, while her fleshly shape yet haunts the world to be to us a perpetual sense of disenchantment?

As he muttered this to himself, all that was implied by that word "loved" smote him with a new pain, and he clutched at his pillow and buried his face in it with a terrible, wordless moan.

There was silence for a few seconds. When he next looked up, the plough-horses had turned a fresh furrow,

and the pleasant was clucking out of sight. The ploughman's cheery cry hurt his ears. He did not feel the sun's blessing any more than a dying creature does; it scorched his eyes—that was all.

"I cannot bear it—I cannot bear it!" he cried. Then, cursing, flung the letters from the bed.

A confused idea was in his head that the beggar for alms was a worthless Jezebel; the school friend a buzzing fly, only good to sting and annoy; also his wife was—well, the woman to whom the letter he held in his hand was written. He did not let go of this letter, but crushed it close to his chest, where it seemed to have fangs and to prey on him.

It was not until this chaos of suffering had in some degree resolved itself into order that he began to dissect his trouble. He tried with his reason to cheat his conviction. He began to say, "This is not so;" and to think of it as a hideous nightmare of imagination. He would read the letter once more; nay, better, he would take it to Nest. Just now he had shrunk at the very memory of her voice; now he would look on her face more hungrily than ever lover eyed it, while he asked her a question which is horrible for one who loves to ask.

"Nest!" he cried, "Nest!" and found his voice too low and husky to make her hear.

He dressed himself with his usual care, only his hands felt lifeless, and once or twice dropped the articles they should have held. He went downstairs with a vague notion that he was going to his own funeral. His servant met him in the passage leading to the breakfast-room.

"A woman wants to see you, sir. I believe she wants a summons against her husband. She's in fear of her life of him. He tried to kill her last night when he was mad with drink and jealousy."

"Show her to the library—I will attend to her presently," Mr. Alymer said quietly, and passed on brooding over the man's words. "Kill her?—that's the ruffian impulse; but what can a gentleman do but kill himself? Only death can clean a man's memory."

He paused at the door of the breakfast-room. What should he find within? A radiant creature, who could

meet him eye to eye; who would alternately laugh and soothe away his anguish; who should forgive him his want of faith? Oh, to be able to say, "Forgive me—forgive me!" He would forget his age, his grey hairs, his stiff joints, and weep at her feet like a shamed child for the wrong he had done her. But even as he half hoped what his imagination conjured up, the words of that accursed letter rose up before his eyes, and the sickness of doubt was on him again.

His wife sat by the table in a pretty flutter of muslin and ribbons. She had not opened her letters yet out of deference to her hot breakfast, which, as she complacently observed, "would get cool sooner than her letters would;" and indeed Mrs. Alymer's letters were generally of the most eloquent description, especially those which proceeded from very young and very old admirers.

As the door opened, she instinctively thrust her hand into a pocket, to make sure that one familiar handwriting was safe from observation; then, without looking up, said—

"You are late, Ben."

As she spoke she poured out a cup of tea, and handed it to him. It was not until their faces were near to each other that their eyes met. It did credit to her nerve that, in spite of the revelation in his look, she put down the cup with a tolerably steady hand, though all the colour was faded from her face. But, though her self-possession momentarily answered to the sudden strain on it, it collapsed before the continuance of his gaze, and a violent trembling seized her.

"What is it?" she faltered; and again "What is it?" But it was harder to say the second time than the first, for the wall of his silence seemed to grow more formidable every moment.

"*This* is what it is!" He pointed to the crumpled paper in his hand; but his eyes questioned hers.

"What does it mean?"

She understood it all with one glance, and framed a lie in her mind, but her tongue failed her.

"I don't—it must be a mistake," she stammered, "I'm very sorry."

He turned from her quickly. He could not bear that she should see the murdered hope in his face.

"She is very sorry, very sorry," he muttered. "Sorry that my soul feels as if it were in hell—or sorry to be found out." Then, turning to her, he began—

"How long—how——" but broke down, and covered his face with his hands.

"Ben! stay. Let me explain. Oh, Ben, it is really nothing to vex yourself about."

She had gone up to him, but something in his face prevented her from putting her arms about him, as she had done in former efforts at reconciliation.

At the sound of her voice he fell back against the wall, and confronted her with white, drawn face.

"What now?" he said huskily.

"Ben, darling" (her face working with emotion), "let me speak to you."

"The sound of your voice sickens me," he said. "It is soft with lies. There is nothing more to hear—nothing more. Let me go," but she placed herself in his way, and fell to weeping.

"What has changed you so terribly, Ben? you did not use to be unjust. Why won't you hear my defence?"

"Because your defence is your accusation," he cried, in a sudden flash of passion; "because had you been innocent, you could have treated this letter as a fabrication; but it is true—true that my wife is Walter Rolfe's mistress!"

"Not that—not that!" she cried earnestly. "On my honour, Ben——"

"On your *what*!" he echoed with bitter emphasis. "Women don't know the word. Why, you have not even been grateful. Was I ever kind to you, Nest?"

Weeping, she answered, "Yes."

"It is hard," he muttered, "to have been kind to a creature for so long all to no purpose!"

A light wind blew in some over-ripe rose leaves through the window, the urn hissed and steamed, the bullfinch trilled merrily on his perch—all the minutiae of their calm, domestic peace were unchanged.

In real life the actors in tragedies rarely indulge in

violent expression. The butler who opened the door to remind his master of the neglected applicant in the library could not guess that the quiet-looking gentleman sitting with his hand shading his eyes from the glare of the sun, and with his gaze fixed on the *Times* obituary, was well-nigh mad with mental trouble. Nest's face was also invisible, but she was playing with one hand a soft tune on a cottage piano that stood near her.

"When shall I see you again, Ben?" she quavered, as her husband proceeded to leave the room.

"Not until evening," he said. "I have business to do on the farm, and must ride out." His tone was quiet, but all the music of happiness had gone out from it. Nest, following him with stealthy gaze, marked how faded his whole manner and appearance was, and grovelled on a sofa in an agony of distress.

"How dared Walter be such a fool? idiot—selfish, inconsiderate idiot! Men have no business to intrigue: they weren't made for it. They should resign themselves to perpetual virtue and veracity. Will Ben ever forgive me? Will he ever believe me again? and I have been so good, too, lately. Even since I was ill I haven't written a single flirting letter. To be sure, I hate writing, but when Walter was here I told him that it must end; and to think that this pest of a letter, this useless, foolish postscript to an old story which I had thought done with, should work all this mischief! Where is Ben? Will he come back to me? What shall I do if he doesn't? What am I without Ben, and I love him so? I wouldn't have done anything to have vexed him for worlds, if I had thought he would find it out."

For awhile she lay huddled on a sofa, a sad, crumpled heap of muslin and twisted ribbons. A wet-cheeked little woman with regretful eyes and worrying hands.

"All men are bores," she moaned, "and I declare Ben was less of a bore than any of them."

Presently she heard the front-door open and shut gently enough, but it had the sound of a thunder-clap to her sinking heart. Could Ben be gone? and if so, where? Could he have gone from her for longer than a day? leaving her to a fragmentary existence; for she knew she

who was part of all the comfort and credit of his life when they were one, would be nothing but a wretched remnant, a despised fringe trodden under foot, when rent from his mantle.

"Not without a word! Surely he would say a word!" But she recalled his habit of taciturnity, and that he had seemed troubled beyond the power of words to express. She rang a bell quickly, and asked the servant who answered it, where his master had gone.

"He has gone to the ten-acres field," the man said readily; "after that he has desired the keepers to meet him with the dogs at the Ash Wood. He is going out by-and-by with a friend, he says. If you look, ma'am, you could see him now."

And nerving her bleared eyes to meet the sunshine, Nest looked towards the ploughed field, and saw her husband standing in conversation with one of his ploughmen. She breathed a sigh of relief; he could not be feeling all she had imagined if he could resume his usual occupations so quietly. Because Nest was herself restless over worries, because she took hasty sips of her chocolate, paced her room with feverish haste, and was unhinged for a day by any shock to her mental equilibrium, she mistook her husband's phlegm for peace.

"Who is the friend? Mr. Woodford of the Grange?" she asked curiously.

"Master did not say who it would be," was the answer.

Left alone again, Nest looked wistfully out of the window. She felt more secure while she could see the familiar form, first bending to speak to one man then another; patting a hot-hearted horse and encouraging a lazy one. It all seemed so natural, so like yesterday, that she was half-disposed to think of the past hour as a bad dream—a nightmare, which had somehow got prolonged from the hours of blackness into the morning sun, and so marred its brightness for a time.

By-and-by he disappeared in the direction of the covert, and she could see him no longer; so she went to her bed-room to arrange the toilet she would wear when he returned. She ate a better lunch for the deprivation

her breakfast—though, as she said, she had to force herself to forget her troubles, or they would have quite spoiled her chop.

By the afternoon, she was outwardly her old bright self, in harmony with the bird that sang in the flower-scented corridor. "Surely he will forgive me; it would kill him not to forgive me, and I'll explain all. I'll tell him the whole truth—or very nearly all." She pressed her face to the window and watched for him. Her glance took in the far wood path, gold streaked by the sun, which she hoped might presently be darkened by other shadows than that of the frail oak leaves. But the afternoon waned and he did not come.





## CHAPTER XXV.

### MR. ALYMER'S FRIEND.

**M**R. ALYMER sat on the sloping side of a ditch which divided one of his woods from the fields. He had directed his keepers and dogs to meet him not at this, but at a more distant covert; he would carry his gun himself he said. "My only friend, my best friend," he had whispered, as he put it on his shoulder.

What a glorious day it was! Even in the cool gloom of the hedgerow the weed flowers were all a-bloom. The west wind stirred the fence briars and showed him a glimpse of river and hamlet, of roadways darkened by slow-moving teams, of red kerchiefs fluttering about the groups of children that were trooping to school. Life was alert even in the silent nook in which he crouched. Beetles crawled on the warm bank, ants fussed hither and thither; the hedge-birds seemed in a perpetual state of self-gratulation in that they were alive and the sun shone. The details of the scene were carried in sharp outline to his mental vision, although the terrible aggregate of his thoughts was confusing him out of his reason. He wondered dimly why everything seemed so vivid to him to-day, and whether the eyes of dying criminals shape the memory of each twist in the ugly cord which has just dangled towards their throat. He had forgotten to hope; his wife's hesitation on such a point was damnatory to her in his candid eyes. Truthful to severity himself, he could make no allowance for her tortuous deviations from



honour. She was a liar, and therefore a failure. She was not the woman he had believed her to be, consequently there was no saying what manner of woman she was. Untruthful, certainly; false, probably; a flaw in his hitherto flawless life, a shame irrevocably linked with his hitherto unshamed day. "I can't forget," he thought; "that's the rub. I can't take her out from my past; and what should I feel to-morrow morning when I woke up to face the cheat moving about my home?"

Down one of the wood-walks he heard the keepers whistling to the dogs. "Come on, lad," one shouted to the other, "or we shall be late for the master."

One of the dogs came sniffing and whimpering through the thicket on his master's trail, and Ben Alymer, the kindest of beings, a man who had never been known to show a hard face to any plaining creature, took up the butt-end of his gun and rated the pointer back.

"Go away, Don; I don't want you." The dog flattened his ears, crouched down and shot up a deprecating glance from his eye, and declined to move. "So you haven't got a soul, have you?" apostrophised his master. "I hit you, and you won't leave me. I never hurt her in my life, and she failed me out of mere wantonness. Damn her!"

He had always been a calm-mannered, pure-tongued man; but that was when all his soul was at peace. The decencies of civilisation go far to suppress brute impulses; but they cannot be certain to root them out. In the lowest phase of jealousy it is agony for a creature to be out-rivalled with its mate; in its highest sense, a man is morally murdered when his self-respect is destroyed through his other self—his wife. He was not an imaginative man, but she had made an imagination for him. He could see her now, standing among the geraniums on the doorstep, an embodiment of welcome, the door opened behind her, her hands stretched out before her, her pretty face dimpling with smiles as he kissed it—pah! and to think that her lips were common to some one else, that was a thought to kill the other one, only that would make a fuss, and even in this extreme time, Ben Alymer was thoroughly English, and determined that no

unnecessary scandal should be made over his abrupt silence.

He brooded thus in the noon, sickened by unhappiness out of all love of life, until it became time to act, to retrace his steps to the house, to go to the wood where his men awaited him, or to so do that he might stay where he was until some one fetched him away. If he went back how would it be? An empty house, a soulless corpse. Her voice had used to sing in the evenings, and her dress flutter until you might fancy a belated bird was flitting through the dusky rooms. In the day, her face hovering over the rose bush, had impressed on his mind the fact of his having a garden. Now he should loathe those shadowless gravel-paths at midday; now he should wake to sudden agony in the night with the memory of the stroke that had pierced him this morning.

"I did not shoot the mare," he argued; "because she could get over it. But I'm too hard hit; I can't get over it."

He sat with his hands clasping his knees, his head down. Every moment he was abstracting himself more from the outer world, and becoming further engrossed with the horror of his thoughts.

Was it less sin to live on and loathe life?

The world was ugly to him. To live through another such summer day would be to blaspheme and doubt. What difference would it make? No one would be injured. His dog there would hunt about a while in the morning for a lost track, his men in the hay-fields would turn the fragrant burthen on their pitchforks more lazily when the master's eye was absent, the white roadway yonder would be shadowed for a brief space by a black procession, its plumes would quiver in dense contrast along the gold edge of the sharp-faced corn, he would be universally lamented in the newspapers, and universally forgotten in his own house. As for Nest—the name made him grasp his gun, and he arose with pale face, but firm gait.

The dog was alert in an instant, and prepared to scramble through the fence with him.

"Come back, Don!" his master cried in a hollow voice.

He was afraid of injuring the dog in the accident which would presently result from a stumbling foot.

"Let it be quick, let it be over quick!" he cried. "Speak for me, Christ! Lord, forgive me!"

He had got one hand on the trigger, and went forward. In another instant his steps would have paused then and for ever; but a voice spoke quickly behind him—

"Take care, Ben, or you'll have some accident."

Nest's face, white but controlled, was near his own, and Nest's hand quietly but decidedly took possession of his gun. "I'll hold it until you are over," she said.

The shock of her presence was scarcely less to him than the touch of that cold metal had been to his forehead. He reeled against a pollard in the hedgerow, his hands faint and helpless, his head on his breast.

Presently he raised his eyes and met hers. He looked at her as a man can only look at one who has given him and lost him his all. There was no fire in his glance; its sole accusation lay in its hopelessness.

"It—it was dangerous!" she gasped, and sat down trembling on the bank.

"What if it *were* dangerous?" he muttered. "Do you think I do not know what is best for me?"

"No," she said decidedly, then rose and came to his side.

He did not shrink from her, because his mind was regaining its balance, and he disliked demonstration, but he sickened at the rustle of her dress.

"You are hating me because you think I have been unfaithful to you. Well, I will swear I have not, and these letters will prove it to you. This one, received yesterday from Walter Rolfe, teems with reproaches of my coldness and threats to withdraw from the pursuit of what he calls a 'shadow.' I must confess that, led away by vanity and idleness, I have played at love-making. I like that people should love me."

"Have I not loved you?" he interrupted sternly.

"Yes; but you have forgotten to exhibit your love. Don't think I undervalue it, although I have staked it against such trumpery winnings. It was a haven to me—the blessing and support of my life. I would give a

good deal to keep it. I will even tell the truth, and bare all my folly to you."

"Folly!" he groaned. "Is that the word by which women excuse the tricks that may send a man to hell?"

"You had forgotten to evidence your love," she persisted. "Women, especially such as lead idle, luxurious lives, grow so tired of the sameness of their happiness. They are vain, and crave for admiration; they are sensitive, and delight in all that keeps their sensibilities alert. The husband who has forgotten to coquet with his wife makes himself liable to all possible rivals; he is so sure of his property, that he forgets to pay it any of the compliments of doubt. Think how full of danger are useless hours. We dress, pay and receive visits, go out and return home to seek another crowd. We live in a perpetual state of parade. Our minds are rarely engaged by any one earnest thought. We take up charity sometimes as a decent pastime, to the extent of heading a list or attending a bazaar, but we take care to keep clear of charity's ugly side. Filth and starvation don't look pretty to one who habitually dabbles in silver and silks. After a time we tire of the sham of our days; they lack flavour. What is the use of going to a ball, if some face is not there which will brighten specially at my arrival? How tame to be at a *fête*, unless I can find a devotee ready to pamper me, and worry my rivals by his attentions to me. You see, Ben, there is more amusement in trafficking with the human heart or vanity than in buying ells of silk at Marshall and Snelgrove's."

"It seems I was to be sacrificed for a fatigue," her husband said bitterly.

"Not sacrificed; only risked. Women are born gamblers, Ben. I was ready to chance my amusement against the risk of your finding me out;" but as she spoke she gave a sick look at the barrels glistening in the innocent grass, and closing her hand more tightly on that which was so full of horrible possibilities, whispered huskily, "Not that, not that; I was not prepared to risk that!"

There was a pause. She seemed to have lost her voice

in a sudden spasm of terror. A bird overhead filled up the lull with a magnificat to the sun.

She dreaded the silence, and resumed hurriedly, "The trifling palls on us. We haven't energy to be great; but we find that a conventional existence lacks salt; hence the indiscretions that sometimes deepen to the tragedies of which we get ugly peeps in the law courts. But I am not a fit subject for divorce yet, Ben, for I have never been false to you; these letters will prove that to you."

"Why not?" he asked bitterly. "What hindered you?"

"Love for you. Though I can hardly expect you to believe me, I honoured you too much to make you seem as mean as a cheated man always seems in the eyes of his successful rival, and I esteemed you too well to care to have any irrevocable break with you. I thought that while I was true to you in essentials, you might forgive all the vagrancies of my vanity. Had my folly become sin, I do not suppose you ever could have forgiven me. Men resent practical deviations from them as bitterly as women condemn faithlessness of sentiment. But while I was pure in fact, I hoped, and still hope, for your forgiveness."

Hitherto she had spoken in a dry, unimpassioned voice, pointing out passages in the letters in corroboration of her statement, anxious to convince his reason first, trusting to after pleading to re-awaken his tenderness; but with her concluding words she laid her hand timidly on his sleeve. He stared at her with a look of mingled scorn and relief.

"Good Lord!" he cried; "do you mean that women play at dishonouring their husbands for their pastime's sake?"

She bowed her head.

"Then you must excuse me, but I think such are more contemptible than those who sin in earnest."

"I have often despised myself heartily. I was getting very tired of it before you made this discovery," she said candidly. "I wouldn't leave you to live with any one of them, Ben."

He was silent; he was too tired, too wrecked by the storm of suffering which had shook him all the day, to

feel keenly. He was dimly conscious of relief in having the worst part of the burthen lifted from his soul. She was not the guilty wretch he had thought her. True, she was not the Nest he had known—she was some extraordinary anomaly, made up of guile and truth. She had aped more wickedness than she had consummated. To a single-minded man, she, and such as she, must ever seem miracles of disloyal folly; but those letters purged her of his worst accusation. He did not yet know whether he forgave her or not. Probably the wound of to-day would never be thoroughly closed; but he had no right to creep at the touch of her hand now; so he let it rest on his arm as they walked home through the fragrant dusky wood. There was reserve between them, but not loathing. All the evening Nest kept an impassive manner, fearing by any extraordinary demonstration to mar the effect of her defence. Ben distrusted demonstrations, and was always more impressed by logic; still he was not altogether angered when at night Nest, suddenly collapsing from her restraint, fell about his neck in an agony of weeping, and sobbed out—

"Oh, Ben, fancy if you had been *brought home to me*; think how ghastly all might be now if I hadn't worried at your delay and come to look for you; think if I hadn't been able to *make you hear* when I wanted to say how very, very penitent I am. Forgive me, husband! forgive me!"

\* \* \* \* \*

A few weeks later and the Alymers had set out for Italy, Mr. Alymer inwardly protesting; why—because he had lately been feeling very unhappy at home—should he make himself very uncomfortable by going abroad? But Nest seemed to wish for the diversion, and certainly it was a more harmless one than others that had occupied her lately.

"How women run to change," he groaned; "every domestic tragedy that afflicts them seems to have its migrative aspect."

He had travelled with Nest when they first married, and Love's middle-aged dream had been rudely disturbed by the lack of material blessings. Florence might be

charming, Rome an inspiration ; but the yearning for home held back his heart from these, as surely as a child's hand pulls his kite from the clouds.

"You should consider me as your home," Nest suggested when piqued by his complaint.

"Yes, my dear ; but I can't consider you in the light of a *Times* newspaper, and the brightness of your eyes does not blind me to the fact that my bath is not bigger than a tin kettle. Then there's your maid, Mrs. Carmine ; she's a suppressed nuisance at home ; but abroad her capabilities of worrying become superlative. She votes herself a martyr from the hour she starts, and calls perpetually on all the party to assist in her canonisation."

Nevertheless, he submitted to Nest's wishes ; he was loth to show any sign of offence now that he had most right to feel it. So he lingered longer with Don than usual in one of their morning walks, and soothed the sleek head with a regretful touch ; that was his way of saying good-bye. Don supplemented this farewell with a series of dismal howls, when he heard the carriage wheels rolling away in the distance. Nest felt an adieu ; it was directed to the ghost of her old pleasant sins ; however, she was glad to be removed from temptation, and hoped she might not meet any of the better looking of her male acquaintances abroad. In case she should do so she had packed up some of her prettiest and most becoming dresses. Two months later she found a letter from her cousin awaiting her at Florence, and welcomed it with a flush of pleasure. The first home letter we receive abroad is as the glimpse of a familiar face breaking the weird twilight of a lonely road. The letter began, "My dear Nest," then "Nest" was scrawled over and "Mrs. Alymer" substituted—

"I have been thinking it over, and drinking it over, ever since you left—'dost think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale ?' Certainly not. But supposing the cakes do not agree with me ! I have my doubts. One's mental digestion grows feeble with years ; I cannot diet myself with pretty fools as I used to. But, then, I am troubled with visions—visions of in-

numerable flies; one would think that I was once a spider; and am haunted by the avenging ghosts of whirrless bluebottles. I want some one to sit with me in the evening to keep away the horrors. She must be beautiful, or she will only add to them. I am going to Vere Court to-morrow to propose for Nella Vere. You have driven me to seek a wife. If she accepts me, and I tire of her, may my *ennui* be on your head!

"Your affectionate Cousin,

"WALTER ROLFE.

"P.S.—Have you heard the scandal about Derrick Erle?"







## CHAPTER XXVI.

### A PARAGRAPH IN THE "COURT COURIER."

**S**UMMER was dying in a passion of colour and storm; winter had sent out its heralds of blasts and showers, to warn the beauty of her death-throe, and her suns blazed more fiercely on the corn-fields between the rainy gusts, and her blossoms put out their last powers of hue and fragrance; so that the stormy airs mixed up heavenly flower-scents with their hints of frost-locked land and turbulent seas.

It was early in August. Derrick Erle had been absent since November, and Nella, his sweetheart, was wishing the beautiful hours away, under the delusion that they were sad ones.

"Another day gone," she said softly to herself, as she shook out her hair in the early sun, and wondered how long it would be before she would care to braid it becomingly again. She counted the days as poor because they were empty of him; but they were rich with hope, and she took a morning face with her to the breakfast-table. It was a face that ever seemed to gladden in the light. The sunflowers stretching heavenward were not more full of glow and aspiration.

"I wonder who sent this," she thought, as she took up a newspaper she found near her breakfast-cup. It was addressed to herself. The direction was shaped to imitate printed characters, with the apparent object of disguising the handwriting, which, however, showed the woman in its angles.

Humming a song—one of those trite refrains about

hearts and constancy which come as naturally to a young girl's lips as love-chirps to birds in spring—she turned over the pages of the strange journal. It teemed with reverential details of the movements of illustrious "personages." Nothing could be more delicate than the phrases used to express the coarser sort of human ills to which even regal or ducal flesh is subject. Did his Grace covet successfully his neighbour's wife, it was an "*esclandre* in high quarters." Did he take a wife of his own to his bosom, moved by the primitive desire to have a mate, and graft himself on futurity, he had formed a "matrimonial alliance." Did his Grace turn to clay, the *Courier* bowed him out of the world with decorous regret, spoke of him by all his titles even when, wrapped in death's ungauzy robes, he waited stilly for God's judgment word; attended him to the very door of the white house, and then devoted twice as long a paragraph to his successor.

Nella wondered to see so many columns given to the glorification of a huge mediocrity.

"Do the really great of this generation never say or do anything worth the telling?" she asked.

Her father smiled at her earnestness.

"All civilisation knows the names that have a future as well as a present; but were it not for all this 'damnable iteration' concerning their dinners and their clothes the world might be in danger of forgetting the existence of his miteship the Prince of Pidwigeon, and her Grace the Duchess of Tulle."

There was more human interest, Nella thought, in her own village annals of the week than in this millinery literature:—

"Young Gemmy Grove had cut Barbara Allen's throat, and while dying she begged him to kiss her. The women said, 'It was all her fault.' The men were inclined to think Gemmy had gone a little too far.—Old Oats, the farm-labourer, who had come to the piteous time of drawing half-man wages, had found that the club in which he had placed his young-day earnings had broken, leaving him and his wife no refuge but the Union, where they would be kept separate, and moan for each other until their feeble lives were moaned out."

When Dora paid her morning visit to Vere Court, she looked with interest at the despised journal. "Shoulder-straps are used in place of sleeves; corsages *à la Venus*, and panniers *à la Fish-fag*, are much worn," she read out, with enthusiasm.

"Shirt sleeves are much *en évidence* this season, and panniers are worn in front of the ladies' dresses, to accommodate their gleanings," mocked Nella, pointing to a distant corn-field, where bent, hungry-fingered women showed dark against a glare of gold and blue.

"But this will interest you!" Dora cried suddenly, not without a little triumph in her tone, "'Mr. D . . . . k E . . e, son of Sir G . . . ge and Lady D . . . . a E . . e.' Must be Derrick Erle of course; but I'm not in the least surprised. I always warned you against that young man, my dear. I know what they are—not to be trusted out of your sight a moment. Do you think I should ever have married Mr. Chaunter if I had let him go home to see his friends, as he wished to do, before the wedding-day? When a young man is at a high pitch of sentiment about a girl, and goes from her into the society of other women, it's as dangerous as his leaving a warm room for the night air without his great-coat on. Dear me, how angry Mrs. Alymer will be that Derrick should have got entangled with any married woman but herself. Never mind, Nella, Willie Smyth isn't to be despised. He is as constant as men always are (out of their contrariness) when you don't care about them, and he will have four hundred a year one day, when several of his relations die."

Dora had relaxed her hold of the paper, and finished her moralising over her knitting-pins, the points of which kept time with her speech, with the air of being in themselves vicious little homilies. Consequently she did not see the white flash which passed over her sister's face, as the latter bent over the newspaper.

She read it through steadily. It spoke of, or rather hinted at, a scandal concerning Derrick Erle and the young and beautiful wife of an officer serving with his regiment in India. The lady had been to England for her health. She was returning to join her husband when she formed Derrick's acquaintance on board ship. The

acquaintance had deepened into intimacy by the time they landed. No suspicions, however, were aroused (here Nella sickened inwardly, although she had begun the paragraph with a bold heart) until some dispute occurred between the husband and wife. The latter took flight from home, and joined her lover, whose regiment was at the same station as her husband. A duel had been whispered about; a divorce seemed certain. Meanwhile the *Courier* expressed profound regret at the probable affliction which this untoward event would cause to a family well known in the best circles, and, as such, entitled to all imaginable sympathy from well-bred people.

Dora did not observe her sister's face any more than she could see into her sister's mind. They were apart in years, in thought, and sympathy. She meant no unkindness by her obtuseness; on the contrary, she was occupied by the idea of providing Nella with the solace of another admirer. She felt that if Mr. Chaunter had succeeded in paying that visit to his family to which she had referred, that it would have pleased her better to have welcomed another possibility in the shape of a new curate than to have sat listless at home with unwatching eyes and unlistening ears. There was a history to be read in Nella's face; but it was a history untranslatable to Dora's placid blue eyes. The first sight of Derrick's name coupled with that of another woman was a lightning flash of pain, which seared the girl's whole soul. Then all youth's hope and credulity came to her aid.

"It is false!" she cried hotly.

"One always likes to think so," Dora and her knitting-pins said. "But *I* never found that absence made the heart grow fonder to any one but the rival who happens also to be absent."

Nella repeated in a lower voice, "It is false!" and left the room, in order to ask of solitude whether such news could indeed be true.

She paced the garden paths restlessly; of course it was all wrong—all a mistake. The blackbird vouched it with two sweet low notes, he who had last year made music when she and Derrick were mute from happiness. The

nasturtiums flaring against pillar and wall had shown darkly glorious in the dusk of evening, which had witnessed their lingering farewells. How could these things yet *be*? How could she see with her eyes nature's constancy of iteration, and yet believe that failure could exist in the love that was sweeter than the bird's note, and more splendid than the blossom?

"Oh, Derrick! my heart " she cried; "I want to get to you, to hear you laugh at this stupid story." The warm scent of the mignonette seemed to stifle her. She pined for a breath of the sea—the element which withheld him from her, and which might bring his vindication. She longed to be away from these pastoral scenes of restful plenty, where the cattle nodded drowsy heads over windless meadow grasses, where the air was thick with the sweet of flowers and the monotone of insect song. She dreamed of a seaport town; of weed-smelling wharfs, with black sides splashed by white fringes of ocean, lights sparkling on land and on sea, rough voices hailing comers and goers, busy hands scarred by oar and rope, a turmoil of life on shore, a flutter of life on the horizon, and a fresh wind blowing over all—a wind pungent with the taste of the sea, and big with expectation, for would it not hold Derrick in its grasp? would not that well-loved face soon brighten with others in that fancy scene at the touch of home-land? He would come back to her and contradict this lie with which some one had dared to malign him.

In this tempest of imagination Nella continued to puzzle out the hardest problem given to the young to solve—the conflict of faith with the first sense of misgiving. All through her trouble sounded the key-note of her trust, "He is true, even as I am true;" but still the trouble was there, and, assured as she was, she yearned for his visible presence, for some token which should echo her belief with "Yes, true, true!" Presently she passed her father's window, and observed vaguely that he was seated at a table covered with papers, that his face was also pale, and that his eyes were staring at nothing, as eyes are wont to do when the mind is blinded with trouble, and can see no pleasant glimpse by which to grope for light.

"What the devil shall I do?" Mr. Vere said, pushing away a heap of scribbled memoranda, with a sickly look. "Max coming home—Gilbert of age—settlements to be looked into—two thousand owed to Rolfe—my horses claimed by the Jews—Springles pathetic—Rolfe magnanimous, that's harder to bear than anything! Was there ever such a run of ill luck?"

Thinking moodily of these things, Mr. Vere almost wished that Sarah, his wife, had not died, or else that she had taken her children with her; with their heads painted as a circlet of angels, and hung on his library wall, they would have suggested pious and tender sentiments; now he was near to cursing Max and Gilbert, as he might dogs who worried him by whining round an empty plate.

With her own trouble deep in her eyes, and with the intense belief in her own agony peculiar to youth, Nella felt her father's vexation in a reflex sense—it was merely the shadow of a shadow. Still she felt it, and went into his room, and looked shy sympathy at the storm of papers that were drifting over Mr. Vere's writing-table.

"Can I do anything for you, papa?" she asked; for her father sometimes employed her in arranging and docketing his bills. Unlike some bankrupts in purse, he seemed to feel a gloomy satisfaction in paying this minimum of attention to his creditors.

"You could do nothing for me," Mr. Vere answered slowly, between nibbles at his pen, "unless you were a confiding Jew, or the *right horse*."

"Is it only money worries?" Nella said, fingering her gold locket the while.

"Only!" echoed her father. "As if there were any others worth suffering an indigestion for."

He spoke lightly, but his face showed how jarred was his mind. He started nervously on hearing a bell ring. "Who is that? Not Max! Not the boys! Run and see, Nella," he said quickly.

When she was gone he muttered to himself, "Not the boys, I hope. They need not hurry me so; I wanted a little more time."

Like the lover in Tennyson's poem, Mr. Vere's faith was "large in Time;" as he often explained to a troublesome

creditor. "Trust is the basis of all enterprise. You trust in me, I trust in chance, thus money circulates."

"But it never circulates back to us," was now their grim rejoinder, and they had become oppressive accordingly.

"How you go on!" Mr. Vere said impatiently, apostrophising a chorus of fretful bell tinkles. "It is only a very rich or very poor man who is so pestered by you."

He began to write a final appeal to the generosity of a usurer. "An advance to meet a temporary difficulty," he begged for, but was interrupted by Nella's re-entrance. "What is it?" he asked.

"The butcher is in want of money, owing to some exceptional calls on his purse."

"He is always wanting money," Mr. Vere said, with an injured air. "I sympathise with him deeply. I wonder if I could manage to raise a loan for him. Ask him what percentage he would give."

"I think he would be content if you would settle his small account, papa," Nella said simply.

"Hm!—Ah! well! In that case I think he had better call again to-morrow."

"And the grocer is winding his books up, and the baker has left no bread to-day," persisted Nella.

"Tell the grocer to send me in his account, and ask the baker what he means by his impudence," Mr. Vere said with dignity. "Muffins ought to be ashamed of himself, considering how long I have dealt with him."

"He says his bill is nearly as long as his acquaintance with us; and indeed, papa, I wish you would settle with them."

"So do I," Mr. Vere said, with moody politeness. "Will you show me how?"

Nella left the room downcast. "It seems to me we have been thieves, and are beggars," she thought. "Can nothing be done?" She looked at the toilers amongst the wheat-sheaves, and then with contempt at her own soft, unused hands. "They can all earn something, even the children. Why was not I taught a trade?" The idea of living on the tolerance or credulity of the tradespeople was shameful. Surely, her father must feel it keenly.

She did not know how rusty and dull the bright-edged sword called "honour" is apt to get in disuse. Mr. Vere was irritated where his daughter blushed. One thought did wound him to the quick. The following Monday would be settling-day at Tattersall's, and on that day he must meet his engagements, or be posted as a defaulter. It was now Saturday.

He went on, repeating to himself, "This is Saturday." All through the afternoon he was plunged in aimless thoughts. When night closed in, he grew restless, like a caged bird, whose trouble grows with the dusk. He walked up and down the room, feeling vaguely worried by the hissing of the urn and chatter of the girls. Then sat down, and felt quiescence to be sharp with stings forgotten in movement.

Said Nella, giving her eyes to a star and her thought to Derrick, "He is as true and as beautiful as that."

Said Mr. Vere, staring at the red moon rising out of the heart of the black woods, "I can see no light; I'm done for."

The lake-waters shimmered under the golden globe, as it mounted through darkness to the tune of slow waggons and all the tired voices of the harvest. By-and-by, the weary hoof-treads passed less frequently; the rocking loads ceased to rustle the boughs which brushed awry their gold fringes; the child's whistle died away in the school-path; the lovers' lane got empty of laughter; only the wild fowl gave a sort of weird life to the lake, troubling it with unaccountable terrors.

As a man might eye a great territory which he had allowed to run to waste, so did Mr. Vere look at the fair scene he was too heartsick to enjoy. It might please some to ponder over the strange intelligences of alien worlds, to people the chilly æther with heart-beats, or to fancy angel-faces in the moon's orbit; others might touch their future by the might of a flower's breath, and a thought led heavenwards by the night-winds—he was hopelessly and ignobly chained to earth by his own follies.

He did not sleep that night, or, if he did, it was in fits and starts, just sufficiently to elude consciousness for a moment, only to suffer a keener pang by its sudden grips.



The day broke on his haggard and wakeful face. He had half a mind to "cut the whole thing." The desultory tweet of birds and the half-light in which they flitted were inexpressibly melancholy. He thought of a certain bottle of opiate in his medicine-chest, and how it was labelled "Rest." The longing to sleep and forget was very strong on him; but it was counteracted by the feverish hope which burns in the gambler's heart until hope's very dregs are spent. "Perhaps the post may bring me something," Mr. Vere said, forcing his thoughts away from the sweet dulling draught, and so he nerved himself to bear daylight.

The post did bring him something; it brought him a letter from Walter Rolfe, announcing his intention of calling at Vere Court that morning.





## CHAPTER XXVII.

### MR. ROLFE PROPOSES.

**T**HE sun striking deep into the mignonette beds; the church-bells chiming "God bless you;" the field-paths dotted with Sunday smocks; grazing sheep breaking the long shadows of the elms; light vapours dimming the hedge-rows—such was the day outside Mr. Vere's breakfast-room window. His face seemed to take no sense of rest from the restful day; he looked like a swimmer who has buffeted all night with storm, only to meet a hopeless dawning. Nella, too, was gloomy. The paragraph in the *Courier* rankled, although she disclaimed her trouble even to herself. She was ashamed to the core of the distrust such trouble implied.

Dora called for her sister. "It is time to go, Nella," she said.

"I cannot pray to-day," Nella answered shortly.

"The sermon will be most improving," Dora said severely.

"It says we ought not to set store on worldly pleasures, but to abjure the flesh and turn our thoughts away from vanity."

"The old story," Nella said impatiently; "old as man's conceit. We must be angels, forsooth! We must abjure the world. Doesn't it strike you, Dolly, that while we are of and in the world, it would be rather ungrateful not to make use of it. Fancy if the fishes were perpetually trying to live above water, and declaring it

impious to enjoy an aquatic life. What pleasures are we to set store on if not those we call worldly, and what sort of religion is it which despises God's gifts?"

"I suppose we ought only to fix our thoughts on things above," Dolly said, settling her skirts; "but Mr. Chaunter knows all about it. Mr. Chaunter says——"

"A higher authority says, 'God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few,'" Nella answered; but she went to her own room, and prayed until her heart was at rest, and came away with dove-soft eyes, humming the grateful words of an old hymn Martha had taught her in childhood. Through the open windows was heard the drone of the bees and the sound of splashed waters where the cattle stood deep in the stream. Walter Rolfe, waiting in the vestibule for some one to announce his arrival, heard the fresh girlish tones mingling with the summer-day voices, and thought that it would be pleasant to have such a bird in his own empty halls. As she came towards him, he eyed her as he might have done a difficult fence in the hunting-field.

"I must take it in my gallop," he murmured, "or my heart won't be big enough to get over." In other words, he meant to propose to Nella before the effect of his morning potations had passed off. "If I once get drivelling about the weather it will be all up with me," he thought.

Turning her bright healthy face towards his squalid one, Nella said, "Do you wish to see my father?"

"I wish to see you," he answered abruptly. "Will you take a turn with me in the garden?"

"A queer man?" mused Nella, as they walked in silence around the mignonette beds. "What can he want? Is he going to offer me another ride on Gilderoy? I shan't take it."

"Miss Vere," Walter said, involuntarily grasping a brandy flask he carried in his coat pocket, "I want to marry, and I want to marry you."

"But I don't want to marry you," Nella said, surprised out of all courtesy.

"That's your principal attraction," Mr. Rolfe said coolly.

"But I—I like some one else."

"So much the better. To be loved is to be bored."

Nella mused. Was Derrick bored? The idea saddened her face.

"You have heard about young Erle," he resumed.

She fired up. "It is false, you know."

"I don't know for certain, but I incline to think it is true."

"Then you don't know him."

"I know my sex. We are apt to break down, however careful the preparation. Forgive the turf slang, Miss Vere."

"Do you know anything else about it?" she said, with a sudden flash of her brown eyes towards him.

"I know the lady, and Derrick Erle is no match for her; and you weren't there, you know, Miss Vere. I dare say, if CEnone had stuck to Paris there would never have been that little row about Troy."

"I cannot talk to you," Nella muttered, and was rushing away when he detained her.

"Forgive me if I have wounded you," he said earnestly.

"Do listen to me for a moment. My motives are not all selfish. Your father is in a terrible way, can't meet his engagements—is over ears in debt, and principally to me. When I heard this story about Erle I said to myself, 'Nella Vere will first be heart-sick, then angry; she will want her revenge on that fickle boy nearly as badly as her father wants money. I will be her revenge, and I will save her father—he need owe nothing to his son-in-law, and his son-in-law may help him out of his difficulties. Assuming this to be true about Erle, how will it comfort you to sit down and watch your own dismay? Better come to a lonely man's home and chase away its horrors. I'm a prey to horrors, Nella. You don't mind that, because you don't love me. No one has loved me for many years past.'"

"It would be a sin to marry you and not to love you," Nella said.

"It is a sin which many young women have been anxious to commit," Mr. Rolfe said grimly. "I'm so sick of the ordinary type of your sex, Miss Vere. You, at all events, have intellect, so need not to plunge into folly for

amusement. You say you do not love me, and so are honest. It is something to start with a truth, however many civil lies we tell each other afterwards. Do think of it, Nella. You will go hunting with me." Nella gave a perceptible shudder. "You will learn to tolerate me, perhaps even to love me; habit is a great beautifier. I do so want you. I want some one whom I can trust; some one who is in herself a home; some one to come between me and all the queer shadows that torment me in the evening. A woman with the soul of a milliner would be of no good to me. I could not lean on a furbelow, or gather courage from the jingling of ornaments."

"I am sorry for you," Nella said softly. Then, with kindling eyes, added, "But Derrick Erle is true, and he and I are one in truth as in love."

"I once believed in truth, but now I don't even believe in falsehood," Walter answered, with a thought of Nest's apostasy.

"I cannot discuss it any further," she said shortly; and went with a troubled face to seek her father.

He turned so pale when he heard the name of his visitor that his daughter moved hastily to his side.

"It is coming!" he muttered.

"What?" she cried, but he avoided her eyes.

"Ruin!" he said harshly. "Go and send Rolfe to me."

"You are not well?" she queried.

"It does not matter," he answered vaguely, "I know an excellent remedy for ill-health and ill-thoughts."

She was leaving him unwillingly, when Walter Rolfe's face appeared at the window.

"Good morning, Vere," he called out, while he motioned to Nella to come and unfasten the window-lasp and admit him into the room.

"Mr. Vere cried, "D——n!" and let something drop from his hand on to the table.

Linx-eyed Walter, following the movement, whispered to Nella, "Did you see *that*?" He shook hands with Mr. Vere, then began quickly. "I have called——"

"For your money?" Mr. Vere broke in with a ghastly

smile. "I was preparing an answer for you, Rolfe, but you came a little too soon."

"I have called," Walter went on with a furtive glance at the object the other had dropped, "to ask you for your daughter. She says she won't have me till she knows whether this story is true about young Erle. She will write to him; and if he owns it is true, she may as well marry me."

"I never said——" Nella broke in, but Walter interrupted her with a gesture.

"You never said you would marry me in any case. All that is natural and proper, but if Derrick Erle throws you over——"

"I will not bear this!" Nella cried, with tears dimming her eyes' richness.

Her father looked at her pleadingly.

"At least hear him," he said in a low voice.

"I do not wish to hurry Miss Vere," Walter resumed. "I will wait until she is tired of her sorrow. I know the wretched old story well enough. Eyes vague, cheeks drawn, observant friends whose compassion sears the raw, days that seem stifled by hopelessness, nights of aching bitterness. Would you believe it, Miss Vere, but a girl suffered thus for me once—as if I were worth a heart-break! Please God, I'll save you from yourself. If Derrick Erle has played you false, you shall have something better to do than sit still and remember it. You shall save one, perhaps two, men from perdition."

As he spoke he covertly slipped into his hand the small bottle which Mr. Vere had dropped amongst his papers.

"I—I don't understand," stammered the latter; "do you mean, Rolfe, that your marriage with Nella would square our accounts. Don't you want money with her?"

"I want her fresh face to look at, and her unstained life to help to clean mine. True, she will come to me with her heart raw for another man, but to my mind that's better than having flirted with a dozen other men. She has not been hacked round the London ball-rooms in the promiscuous embrace called valseing. Her mouth is not grimed by town slang, nor her face whitened by town paint. She does not drink, smoke, nor bet; in fact, she

is a wonder, and I want nothing with her but herself. You will write at once to Erle, will you not, Miss Vere?"

There was a pause. Nella gave a sick look at the contents of Mr. Rolfe's hand.

"Do you think he could have meant it?" she whispered hoarsely.

Her father had walked away to the window to conceal his quivering face, and Walter was able to show her a glimpse of the bottle labelled "Rest."

"Possibly. You see, to be posted a defaulter is so deuced awkward," Mr. Rolfe answered reflectively.

"And you could help him?"

"I could help my father-in-law."

Again there was a pause, which was filled up by the church bells coming dully sweet through thick woodlands. She at last broke out passionately—

"This," tightening her hand on the newspaper, "is a cruel lie!"

"At least ask him," urged Walter gently. "He is young, so I daresay will tell you truth."

"Yes, ask him," echoed Mr. Vere turning to his daughter. "I do not insist, Nella, but it would be a great convenience. Any way, you could not get an answer for two months; something may turn up in two months."

The girl looked with a sort of wonder at these two world-worn sceptics, who did not believe in faith or love. With a face divinely radiant as the ideal of young hope, she recalled her lover's parting pledge.

"Never—never to change!" she whispered.

Walter guessed at her thoughts by the eloquence in her face.

"If he turns up trumps, we'll say nothing more about it; but if he has revoked, you surely will not give him—I may say them—the satisfaction of thinking you are wearing the willow for them. I think I told you I know the lady slightly. She is very pretty," added crafty Walter.

Nella's eyes fell; it was a trick they had when they were laden with anger she did not wish to reveal.

"I would do anything you and my father wished," she muttered, "if—if it were as you think."

Mr. Rolfe gently dropped the laudanum bottle on to the baize table, where it fell noiselessly, as befitted a slumbrous poison.

"It will be quite safe for the next two months," he whispered, in answer to a quick uneasy glance of Nella's. Then turning to Mr. Vere, he said—

"I shall go up to Tatt's to-morrow and settle all claims. Be easy," and he immediately left the room, too wise to wait for Nella's second thoughts.

"I really did think I was going to know a thing or two I didn't know before," Mr. Vere murmured, resuming his usual lightness of manner, and rolling the physic-bottle to the back of a drawer,







## CHAPTER XXVIII.

"Would half my wealth  
Would buy this for a lie."

SO FAREWELL HOPE.

"**T**HINK," said Dora sententiously, "that when any one's in love in a household it makes it very uncomfortable for everybody else."

And, in truth, Dora's sister seemed to be possessed by a fever of unrest as the time drew near when Derrick's answer would be due to arrive.

"You're as bad as the bats, Nella, you sulk all day and fidget all night; but there is one thing about girls, they don't show their heart-symptoms so awkwardly as boys. Look at Willie Smyth, sighing like a grampus, and tumbling over your skirts until half the gathers give way, in evidence of the strength of his feeling and the size of his feet."

"I hate Willie Smyth," Nella said crossly.

Nella would have pitied him, even though she might not have taken the trouble to alleviate his sufferings. But youth, passionate-eyed, true-hearted youth, is rarely conscious enough of all its possible weakness to be sympathetic and tender. Meanwhile the days waxed grey, and the winds swept away the first fringes of autumn foliage. In the morning Nella went through her few household duties with unwonted precision. There was no spontaneous pleasure in her eyes to answer her dog's gambols, or her bird's call, so she was scrupulously attentive, like an

untender wife, who feels she owes atonement for the lack of loving looks and loving gestures—those bright bubbles on love's well-spring.

In the evening Nella's time was her own. She was free then to press a blank face against the corridor windows, to sing grave snatches of song in gaps of thought, to wander aimlessly through sodden fields, until the pathways were lost in rain and darkness.

Walter Rolfe heard of her restlessness with kindly contempt. He had struck up an alliance with Dora, and Dora was as prepossessed in his favour as young women of small means are apt to be with a possible and wealthy brother-in-law.

"She doesn't care how wet she gets her feet," Dora grumbled. In her heart she thought that had she ever had a chance of the trousseau and jewel-box the future Mrs. Rolfe would own, she never would have risked a fatal attack of bronchitis before such ecstasy had been hers.

"Young lovers always make themselves uncomfortable, and seem to take a melancholy pleasure in it," Mr. Rolfe said coolly; "fortunately your sister's beautiful look of health seems to promise security against her imprudences. When she is older, she will feel that dinner and dry shoes are not without their attractions, however racked the mind."

By-and-by, Nella's face began constantly to turn in one particular direction. "It must soon come," she thought; beyond that brooding sky-line would come words that would lighten all her horizon. Were it not for that hope, she would sicken at the hedge-fringes which imprisoned her eyes with their relentless iteration. Her thoughts began to flit to and fro, as in a fever dream. At one moment she saw Derrick's face of contempt as he read her note. With the pithiness of intense passion she had merely written, "Is it true?" She had enclosed the paragraph from the *Courier* in her letter. She could almost have smiled in scorn at her own folly at asking such a question,—only suspense was taking all decided expression from her face.

Sometimes her cheek glowed—that was to the remembered touch of his hand; sometimes a pain shot up in her

heart with the rapidity of an ill-weed—that had something to do with Nest Alymer's eyes and Derrick's consciousness of them. Then came memories of summer, on which she could rest as a happy bird fluffs its plumage over a safe bough. The stealthy flower-sweet hours had given her a thought on which to redden and pale—a beautiful thought, which had made life a jubilant storm. Had it died with the June butterflies? was it to turn sapless and death-tinted, like the decayed blossoms in which her feet now sank? She believed that the summer would come again, and that Derrick's answer would bring her gladness. But, all the same, the fever in her mind grew as the time drew near for the answer to arrive.

One day she could think of nothing but the sea-fringe whispering wild secrets to the coast. She had read in the paper of the expected arrival of the Indian mail. All night the throb of the waves was in her ears, and her letter seemed to advance and recede with every doubt of the surge. She seemed to be losing control over her brain; it reflected perpetually shifting images, and she caught herself muttering words that had no value in her mind. When the post-hour arrived, she would have liked to have run to meet the postman; the flame in her heart would have outburnt the morning fog and wet wind. But such a proceeding would excite notice; her father would leave off sipping his coffee; Walter Rolfe lift up his head; and both would think she was doubting; would pity her, and despise Derrick.

A great pride lifted her head and filled her brown eyes with sun. The long-watched-for answer was nearly in her grasp, and presently she would tell her father that she could not help him in the way he wished; not even for him could she break the solemn pledge she had taken on that farewell night, "never, never to change."

Walter Rolfe was breakfasting at Vere. He had domesticated himself in the house, in order to accustom Nella to the sight of him.

"The best way to tame parrots," he explained to Dora, "is to let them get thoroughly familiarised with your appearance before you attempt to make the slightest advances to them."

The letter was brought in with some others on a tray. The old butler seemed to take ages to get round the table ; but for pride's sake, Nella sat with quiet hands and lowered eyes. Only when the thin feeble-looking envelope was in her grasp, did she clutch it with quick, preying fingers, and with a heart that seemed to be throbbing in her throat she unfolded the first sheet.

The letter was a long one ; but the first sentence was all that she saw. The pulses that had sped so fiercely, suddenly grew still, and she felt as if the chill of the dying was creeping on her, from her feet upwards.

For pride's sake she made an effort to rise, to speak, to be Nella, in fact ; but she felt to be fading away into some other identity, something inexpressible, sick, and shamed, something which must run a long journey with a knife in its heart.

The sentence she had read ran thus :—"It is true, but——" She had read no further. "But" could not help her ; "but" could not excuse aught ; "but" could not make Nella again, nor make Derrick Derrick.

The feeling of fainting passed away, and she regained a consciousness which had become hideous to her.

She did battle with herself ; youth is reserved, and does not endure to wear its heart-break on its sleeve.

"It is all over between me and Mr. Erle," she said slowly ; "and I—I think I'll go to my room."





## CHAPTER XXIX.

### DURNT SACRIFICES.

“**T**HERE are many things a man should give up when he marries,” Walter Rolfe said to himself, as he sat alone in his lodgings in Couliesses Street. “When I was a boy, every great event, such as a visit to Astley’s, or a death in the family, was marked by extra ablutions, and now I must break my pipes, lock up my laudanum-case, burn old letters and photographs, and show a clean, good-boy kit to Mrs. Rolfe. . . .”

He began with the letters first, as being the most easily parted with. “What would life be without lies?” he said, with a pleased smile passing over his face as he read sundry professions of adoration. “Of course, she did not mean it; but the wish to deceive was a compliment.”

He grew tired at last, and began to confuse one writer with another. Was it Nelly who wrote the consumptive-looking characters and imperfect, though forcible, English? Was it Susan who was afflicted for his soul, and prescribed a requiem of two services on Sundays, to “handicap” (as Walter expressed it) their common attachment? Then how was it that the portrait of Nelly, unattired as a prince in burlesque, was folded between the texts of Susan’s homily? “Has my white lamb turned speckled?” quoth Walter, with a hazy reminiscence of Laban’s perplexity. He settled the matter by tossing the letters, photographs and all into the fire. A woman would have taken a

separate farewell of each reminiscence ; but men have no sentiment.

The pipes were dismissed with a greater show of emotion ; they had been embrowned with the growth of old friendships, and a man has a kind and distinct memory for the comrade who shared pleasant food, good wines, and easeful hours with him, when he is glad to evade thoughts of the charmers whose caprices more often spoiled than enhanced comfort. Walter restored his pipes with a reverent hand to their cases. "Another time," he murmured.

Then he sat and eyed the laudanum.

"It is the aftermath of hard drinkers," he thought ; "it is the lull to all the fever and nausea caused by its ally, the brandy-bottle. Brandy is irritating, opium is soothing me to death. Can't I put on the drag now ? Will not Nella Vere save me from myself ?" He locked up the bottle, and turned his back on it. He tried to forget it, to fix his thoughts on the future. Henceforth the future would have its responsibilities for him ; he could not go on playing at suicide without involving others in his mental and physical ruin. Ay, mental ruin ! For had not his brain been so severely shaken by attacks of delirium that his doctor had warned him that his temporary hallucinations might one day end in permanent mania ? "You have tried to squash your attendants between your fingers, mistaking them for blue-bottles," his medical Mentor had said to him after one of these attacks ; "take care you don't one day feel as if you yourself were a fly, and whirring all over the place."

Recalling these warnings, Walter sat to-night with his back to his temptation, fighting it as a man fights an imprudent attachment ; it is ruin, it is degradation, and it is only paying a proper compliment to one's reason to combat the evil in theory.

In theory, poor curates may condemn as rashness their tendencies to matrimony and multiplication of their species. In theory, the experience of Timnath must have forewarned Samson of Gaza. In theory, a man with a morning headache is a teetotaller for evermore. But in practice, whose quiver is more often full than that of the

indigent son of the Church? Who ever trusted woman as did the strong son of Manoaah? and who ever got the crave of stimulant out of his corrupt constitution, when such crave once became master there? Walter Rolfe reasoned with himself so successfully that he left nothing further to be argued. Those familiar with the virtuous resolutions of hard drinkers will not be surprised to hear that he awoke the next morning with an empty bottle by his side and feeling more than usually "all to pieces."

And Nella, too, kept vigil on the eve of her wedding-day. She sat alone in her room at night, with the loops of a gold chain slipping through her listless fingers. The paralysis of her extremity was still on her. The fire was brooding low in the grate. The west wind sighed weird omens past her windows. She saw and heard thus much, and knew that she was dully miserable; that were an earthquake to uproot her home, she should not feel any surprise. All surprise, all sharpness of emotion was exhausted in that moment when she felt to have grown utterly worthless to herself.

She would awake from these fits of forgetfulness with a quiver of anguish, crying softly, "I cannot bear it!" then hide her face in deep pillows, and bite her crossed arms, but never shed a tear. The cow may blare for its calf, the strong man may be ennobled for the tears wept for a lost brother, but the ignominy of self-deception must be bewailed in bitter silence, too shamed for expression.

*"The silent griefs that out the heartstrings,"*

how apt we are to underrate their powers; how we speak of love-fits and disappointed passion, as though they were matters of course, to be as much sympathised with as the attacks of distemper to which all young kennels are liable.

Yet, seeing life is but a span long, surely 'tis as painful to suddenly remember these soul-wounds, and cry with a gasp, "It is there!" as it is to moan over a lost rubber of whist, or the spot on a silk dress.

She had a dim idea that to-morrow's ceremony would

be a great sin; but some one wished it very much, and for herself she had no wish. She had spoken to Walter; but he had put aside her scruples. She had ventured a few objections to Dora.

"Is it right to marry any one you don't care for?"

"Not any one," Dora had answered promptly; "but Mr. Rolfe is a 'somebody;' besides you are tolerably sure to become fond of him. No good-hearted woman lives in companionship with a man without becoming attached to him; and, oh, Nella, the Brussels veil is heavenly!"

To-night Nella's vigil was spent in stupor rather than reverie. She was thankful for these moments of deadened consciousness; it was something to escape from the sight of the great ugly wound in her life.

When Nella went to bed there were ashes of burnt letters on her hearth, as there had been on Walter's, and the miniature glass, which had been kissed dim all the happy nights she had watched and hoped, now lay shivered in the grate. The difference between them was, that while Walter had consumed the representatives of numberless attacks of *ennui*, Nella had put the seal to weariness which it seemed to her must be endless.

The next morning dawned in a steady drizzle of rain. Mr. Rolfe had to be awakened early, in order that he should catch the first train to Vere.

Seeing how heavily he slept, his valet was doubtful of success. "For anything less than his first wedding-day I shouldn't attempt it," that functionary observed.

The uncanny images that distorted Walter's slumbers made him formidable at first waking. His impulse was always to hit out straight from the shoulder. This morning, however, he woke in a more kindly mood than usual.

"All right! I know," he murmured; "must get up—a long way to drive to meet. Top-boots ready, eh, Simpson?"

Simpson respectfully hinted that "it was not a hunting-day."

"Ah! I recollect," Walter said, with an effort. "Please you, my lord, there's a man to be hanged," that's what Simpson should have said. "I'll get up—I



will, upon my honour, Simpson, if you'll only give me five minutes more."

"Five minutes more will lose you the train, sir," the implacable Simpson said, and pressed hot water and shaving-brushes on his master so importunately that the latter muttered pettishly, "I never would have married, had I known I should have to get up early. Since it must be, for goodness' sake get me some brandy and cayenned toast."

The wedding passed off smoothly, and with the usual amount of congratulations and ormolu card-racks; in fact, no sooner was it made known that the hitherto neglected Nella Vere was about to marry ten thousand a year (it can't be helped, if a man cannot be something greater than his fortune, he must be content to be merged in it) than numberless budding acquaintances flowered into friends, and showered on her the usual cheap encumbrances proper to the occasion.

There was some valuable jewellery from Walter and from Mr. Vere. The latter went on "tick," as he termed it, in the most liberal manner possible, to show his magnificence and his regard for his daughter. There were papier-mâché trays, which had no apparent use, and uncomfortable ink-bottles, calculated to engulf not more than one bluebottle; there were penholders which were likely to evoke hard words from any scribe but a clergyman of the Church of England; there were prayer-books without stint,—in fact, any relative who did not care to spend more than a sovereign on the wedding-tribute, chose to assume that the bride and bridegroom were singularly unprovided in this respect. There was also a profusion of Bibles, and a good deal was said about the intrinsic jewels which the volumes contained, while affectionate inscriptions on the blank leaves enjoined the pair to study the contents much and often.

"But we can't study more than two copies at a time," Walter said ruefully to Mrs. Chaunter; "you had better distribute the others to the poor of the parish; they want them no doubt more than we do; they want *everything* more than we do; and as for the ormolu knickknacks, was

any couple ever found mad enough to pack such things up?"

Dora gave some of the Bibles to the better class of her parishioners, such as did credit to the ivory crosses and gilt-edged leaves; but kept the ormolu ornaments for herself, to the disgust of Mr. Chaunter, who had all a man's usual dislike of theoretical ink-bottles, rickety penholders, and such like petty nuisances.

A few days before her marriage Nella had once more begun to watch the road by which letters came to Vere. She had written once to Derrick shortly after she received his letter.

"I never should have believed it—never, only you have said, 'It is true.' I am to marry Mr. Rolfe, but that doesn't matter after your letter. I pray to forget all."

As she wrote these few words with sad, shrunk mouth and drooping figure, she was hardly conscious that they represented the germs of any hope in her mind. Yet something which was neither hope nor expectation, but a mixture of both, must have caused those unquiet looks towards the road, must have prompted her desire that her marriage should not take place until Christmas. At Christmas she might have an answer.

Christmas had come, and with snow-heavy fences and echoless roads. Indoors, fires crackled and faces assumed airs of festivity. Mr. Vere, who hated winter, declared that Christmas mirth was the gaiety of despair. "'Tis the song of the Girondins," he said. "We are too proud to own how much we feel the tyranny of the season. We deck our sacrificed selves with that very plain shrub, the holly; we submit abjectly to be robbed right and left by our inferiors, and call it 'seasonable liberality;' we loathe going to bed, and then we stare at our morning baths in a state of nervous humiliation, envying the Finns, who are dirty and don't mind it."

Nella, on the previous day to the wedding, pressed her face against her frost-spangled windows; saw people come and go on the noiseless paths; saw the distant river, paralysed in the midst of its broken-backed snow-edged reeds; heard the clang of bells breaking the white silence,

and said, "It is all over. He would have answered or have come by now, if it were not all over." And so left the window, and Dora came and tried on the wedding-veil.

On the next morning a thaw had set in, and the snow only lingered in flakes, deep in the ditches. Still the shady side of the banks would require very careful riding, Walter declared in that early journey he took down into the country. The very idea made him turn to his flask for comfort. When he got to Vere, he voted himself nervous, and drank "just enough to steady the hand which was to put on the ring," said he.

He had written to Nest to beg the loan of the Limes for his honeymoon. "I am as happy as I ought to be," he wrote, "with the most beautiful woman in England for my wife."

He chuckled maliciously, thinking, "that will get a rise out of Mrs. Nest."

But when was a woman ever surpassed in malice?

Nest wrote back the most cheerful acquiescence, and added a hope that Nella was as happy as himself, and "had he heard that Derrick Erle was on his way to England? and was he not pleased to know that the birth of a little son had made Ben and herself the happiest couple in the world?"

Owing to the proverbial uncertainty of Roman postal arrangements (Nest's letter was dated from Rome), Walter did not receive her retort until the morning of his marriage, and did not read it until after the ceremony was over. The Limes, however, had been prepared for his reception by orders sent by telegram by considerate Ben Alymer, who was well pleased that his wife's quasi-admirer and favourite cousin should be securely attached to the apron-string of any other woman.

"Poor Walter!" sighed Nest, when she heard of the intended marriage.

"Rich Walter," cried her husband, "to have won a handsome young girl!"

"Who married him for his money," interrupted Nest. "They *all* do," she added reflectively.

"All?" echoed Ben with a reproachful look.

"Excepting me," she said promptly. "I married for love, dear." She owned to herself, "That was a fib; but, then, I love him just as well as if it had been so." And in truth, since the arrival of the miniature Ben, Nest had begun to prize her husband greatly, if only as the father of the most glorious prodigy in nature.





## CHAPTER XXX.

### OUR PLEASANT VICES.

“**A**FTER the ceremony the happy pair proceeded to the residence of the bridegroom’s cousin, Mr. Alymer, of the Limes, there to spend the honeymoon,” said the *Courier*. And for once the *Courier* was accurate, save in the use of the adjective. A bride with a “knife in her heart,” and a bridegroom with a something very like a “bee in his bonnet,” could scarcely be quoted as specimens of felicity.

Mr. Rolfe looked hazily at his wife through his wine-glass, as she sat by the window of the Limes’ drawing-room, her face as leaden and apathetic as the sky.

“Is there one, or are there two of ’em?” he speculated. “On my soul, I can’t make out how many there are of her! Nella, how many——”

He broke off as she came to him in answer to his call.

“I see—I see,” he said, looking relieved. “Thank you, but my head feels so queer. Would you mind my going out for an hour’s gallop? A gallop would put me right, I think.”

Walter suspected that he was very drunk, and hoped that exercise and open air might sober him. Also, he was beset by growing vagaries; he had a dim terror of the house, the walls kept threatening to close on him and roof in his head. “I must get away from them,” he thought, “or I shall howl.”

“Would you like to come too?” he asked of Nella,

feeling it was only right to offer her similar means of escape.

She shook her head, but suggested an extra wrap.

"It is so cold," she said, shivering.

"I thought it cold once," Walter murmured, with a wise look. "That was when I was young and healthy, like you; but now I'm always chippy, and my head is *so* hot, Nella." Recovering himself with a violent effort, he added, "I mean to say that the hot-water pipes here oppress me a great deal; and so I'm going out for an airing."

"It's the hot-water pipes, nothing but hot water, I assure you," he stammered, as he left the room with a dignified gait.

Nella, not in the least understanding her husband's condition, sat listlessly by the window and waved a farewell to him as he rode away on his horse.

"Excellent girl! no sulks, no questioning. We have skipped the disagreeable first year, and have fallen at once into the comfortable stage of studying each other's comfort," Walter said to himself. Still he was haunted by his fancy about the walls, and shook his head. "I ought to have made her come. When they get quite close to her face she'll be too frightened to move; perhaps she'll scream out. I shouldn't like to hear that." And he hastened his pace. He was on his old friend the cob; he had had the wit not to trust himself to Gilderoy. Gilderoy would take any advantage of his rider compatible with his (Gilderoy's) own safety. But the cob was a perfect Samaritan to all helpless burthens. He had originally belonged to a farmer, who had christened him, "Bottle-holder;" and a long course of market-days had trained him into being as faithful a friend and supporter as a drunken man need have. If Bottle-holder's rider was partially incapable, and tried to take the wrong side of the road, or mistook Mr. Chaunter's little roadside vicarage for a public-house, Bottle-holder resisted the mis-direction with an obstinate straight-going action there was no mistaking. *He* knew where the "Three Ploughs" was, though the creature, "with a soul to be saved," on his back had suddenly turned idiot and forgotten it. If the

master collapsed from the saddle altogether, Bottle-holder would stand quite still during the involuntary dismounting, and then graze by the superior animal's side, taking great care to step over and between his limbs—a tenderness the owner did not always reciprocate, as, unless he were in the torpid, he was apt to be in the pugnacious stage, kicking and hitting out indiscriminately.

But Walter's was more than drunkenness, it was fast increasing mania; and the cob, accustomed to a more sedate class of intoxication, could not make out why he was being hurried so much out of his usual pace. Far too staunch to say "No," he heaved and snorted and splashed along the half-thawed roads, as though he were trotting for a wager.

And Walter's thoughts grew wilder with the pace. At one moment Nest Alymer's face was pressing close to his, with a jeer on her lips. He cut at her with his whip, and then apologised abjectly, to what?—to the scratchy shadow of a holly bush, showing over a garden paling. Then another and more uncomfortable idea possessed him—somebody or something was after him. He took the echoes of the cob's hoofs for the sound of other hoof treads. He thought of turning to look behind him, but shuddered, and urged his horse instead.

"It's coming at a devil of a pace!" he whispered. "Keep going, cobby; keep going."

And there were faster splashes, and the hedges looked like one long continuous thread, and the woods were dark blots on the night, and the snow patches came and went in fierce blinding lights, and the faint stars set to dancing in the wintry sky, and the sky itself became a mist mixing with that other mist, the earth; and the unseen "it" gained on him, although the cob's bit was frothed white, and his sides gored red, and the dim, hideous, surging earth took part against him.

"They are all—everything is after me!" Walter cried, with a wild look in his eyes. He no longer dared to look at the sky-line, the woods, or the snow-touched furrows—all was closing in on him!

"The pollards are stumpy and short-winded," Walter cried gravely. "I can beat them; but the river yonder

is running by my side a thousand miles an hour, and what horse can stand against such odds?"

His thoughts leapt back to the Limes' drawing-room. "I ought to have brought Nella with me, that would have been company. But then there was such a lot of them. I ought not to have married them all, surely."

A sudden increase of shadow in the road made him use his spurs. Everything now seemed to be crowding in pursuit of him. They were all on him, he moaned. The sulky river, the swift-running osier-fringe, the stretching woods, the church-steeple, taking a sharp snow-light up into the darkening night—all these had left their places to hunt him to death.

"Faster, cobby! faster!" he whispered, "or they'll have us."

Suddenly a bright idea struck him.

"They won't follow us across country. I think we can show them a line, eh, old horse?"

And turning the cob's head suddenly, the maniac put him straight at a low gate leading into a field. Across the field a pathway, glazed by frost, meandered like a silver ribbon. The cob, with an effort, got over the gate, crashing the topmost bar, and, with a wild cheer, Walter Rolfe galloped forward over this strip of road, which led through darkness to the river.







## CHAPTER XXXI.

### ON REVIENT TOUJOURS.

**E**VERY one said it was very shocking, and every one was secretly gratified at having something very shocking to talk about.

"Mr. Rolfe's horse had run away with him, and had flung him, causing concussion of the brain to the unfortunate rider."—Such was the story currently reported and believed; only Bottle-holder's former owner was incredulous. "The gentleman must have been *very* drunk to believe old Bottle-holder was running away with him," that worthy said; "not but *I* sometimes thought the old horse had taken a drop too much, when I couldn't make out why his legs were standing over, instead of under me."

Every one was very sympathetic—the county newspaper to the verge of pathos. It spoke with large-type emotion of the newly-made bride's bereaved condition, and closed its notice with a classic, though totally inappropriate, quotation from the story of *Ginevra*!

The county ladies gladly expressed their interest in the wealthy, if unhappy, Mrs. Rolfe, by giving themselves a motive for their dull carriage-drives, and leaving numberless cards of inquiry at the Limes and at Vere Court.

"Mr. Rolfe was better," was the answer given to all querists; "and that he was going away for change of air."

It would have been more correct to say that he had

been moved away ; for poor Walter had lost all power of decision. The "pure brain" does not always—

"By the idle comments that it makes  
Foretell the ending of mortality."

His physical end was not near ; but, mentally, he was as far off his fellows as though the long good-bye had in fact separated him from them.

When Bottle-holder stopped short at the water, his sudden swerve had unseated his rider, who was shaken by the fall, but not otherwise injured. When his servant and Mr. Vere were groping through the woods in search of him, they were attracted in his direction by the sound of low laughter. It was a sound that pierced even Mr. Vere's selfishness, and made him call remorsefully on God and on his daughter to forgive him what he had done.

Meanwhile every care was taken to hush up the true state of the case. Nella left the county with her husband, and no one knew that she dared not stay a single moment alone in his company. She was terribly awed, but not crushed. The idea of nursing back her husband to health re-animated her mind—something to be nursed, something to suffer for and protect. What true-hearted woman ever failed to find a talisman in such an object ? Everything that money, science, and patient nursing could accomplish was done for the unhappy young man, who could do nothing better for himself than throw away Heaven's fair gifts of health, youth, and fortune for the exercise of one absorbing ignoble vice, with its after-consequences of mental degradation.

Nella went away with her husband ; and at her request Mr. Vere stayed behind, to make excuses and invent reasons for Walter's illness.

"When he gets better, he will like to know it was kept secret," Nella said, full of tender pity for the strong man, more helpless than a child.

But a day came when Nella returned to Vere.

"It was of no use," she said, with a scared face to her father ; "I could do nothing, I made matters worse. It was getting dangerous for me. They say he is calmer in

my absence. That seems hard; for now I have nothing to do—nothing!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The listless face that haunts the windows, the restless feet that seek no goal, the eyes that long for dawn and then sicken of its light, such was Nella's portion. She told herself that she would not be crushed, that neither falsehood nor sorrow should taint all her young life. Were there not still birds in the air and flowers in the sun? The winter was nearly past; little cold-faced blossoms were breaking through the hard mould; in the woods the hoofs of the hunter's horses were set around by thick primrose stars, and the hounds splashed brooklets over violet banks.

"It is time to give up," quoth sportsmen. And "it is time to begin," said Nella. To begin a new existence, and to bar out the old life from her days. The sweet old life and its bitter after-taste, the shadow of her present trouble—she would free herself of both, and live usefully and courageously, as befitted a reasoning being. She took long walks, and gave much in charity; but felt herself jarred by the spring tunes in the air, and wondered what the recipients of her alms could find to be grateful about.

She never wrote in her diary now. She shunned all self-analysis; and did not care to note the lapse of any especial day, when all days seemed merged in one long twilight weariness. She feared being pitied, and kept away from Dora. Mr. Vere was often absent from home (a symptom of returning solvency), and so by degrees Nella's life grew estranged and ebbless, as those lone lakes that shine darkly on Alpine peaks.

One March evening Nella sat brooding in the shadows, sad and still as the hour. The grim despotism of winter oppressed her; she delighted in those languid summer twilights, which take the scent of flowers and song of birds far into the night. Now nature was mute with frost, and the early spring buds which had been coaxed forth by the morning sun were paying for their daring with blackened tips. Not a sound broke the rigidity of the hour, save when a fox barked as it prowled on the frozen lake in search of wild-fowl.

She was tired of watching bleak days and bleaker nights, tired of the restraint she had put on her thoughts—bidding them “never look back;” and the bugbear in the far-off country seemed more terrible now that she could not face it.

Our dear dead grow to be a terror to us when we shun the chamber their souls have lately quitted. There is more cheer in looking at the loved face frankly, and recalling “how you loved me when you lived, how promptly this stiff hand was wont to return my pressure! Dear, if you could speak, it would be to endow me with the joys of your paradise!”

And Walter Rolfe was more terrible than death. To look at his mindless face was to feel abased by its kinship to humanity; to listen to the pointless wanderings of his tongue, made an animal's voice seem pregnant with reason.

If she could have but stayed with him; if she could but have cheered one dark phase of his troubled visions, it would have comforted her. Now that she was absent from him, she was perpetually haunted by his weird laughter, and dogged by the fancy of his footsteps. She would have preferred to have faced him, to have expiated in patient tender care the great sin she had done in marrying him with no love for him in her heart. But the doctor's fiat had gone forth that her presence, and indeed that of any woman, increased his irritation. He craved for one woman's society, but she was not of this world. He frequently asked and watched for her, but rejected with resentment those whom he considered as unworthy imitations of the phantom he coveted.

So Nella sat in solitude, a mentally girded prisoner. She would not look back, she swore; she could not look forward. She could only sit and watch the present ebb from her. She had no longer much pleasure in home occupations, nor in looking at the home faces. “I was wounded in the house of my friends,” she thought. If Derrick had done ill by her, why need they to have burdened her with this nightmare whom the law called her husband, but who would not himself let her have even the miserable satisfaction of familiarizing herself with the tragedy he embodied?

As she sat striving not to think, and watching the mist lying like a silver wedge between sky and lake, she heard a faint peal of the door-bell. Who could it be? her father was not expected to return for some days; Dora was usually busy at this hour in putting the little Chaunters to bed, and exhorting them not to address their prayers to the moon, whose shining face had a tangible attraction for them; while visitors were rare at Vere; so rare, that old Isaac had strolled down to a neighbour's house, and Martha was dozing between her hymns by the kitchen fire. The appeal at the bell had been too gentle to rouse her, and Nella was about to summon her, herself, when she heard footsteps coming lightly over the frozen gravel path that ran round the windows. She was not scared, for nothing that came from that star-bright world outside could be so awesome as her own thoughts; but looked up wonderingly, when a tall form blotted out the moonlight from the pane, and a man's step trod down crisp winter flowers that clustered thick under the shelter of the wall. Then her heart stood still, for a voice she knew called her by name, saying, "Let me in, Nella. It is I, Derrick."

\* \* \* \* \*

She pushed back the window-bolt, and he entered with a blast of cold air which, with all its freshness, could not raise any bloom in her blanched face. She could not speak; her breath came and went fast. The wild-fowl screamed in the rushes; the fox yelped in the wood, but they had suddenly become part of another night.

Time's hands went back at the sound of her lover's voice. She was Nella Vere once more, face to face with joy; her heart, defiant of the present and the future, leaped to its old kinship with the man who stood before her. What should hinder her from putting her arms about his neck, in an ecstasy of welcome? Nothing but the fancy of that distant laugh which had pursued her all the evening. So she sat, with clenched hands and miserable eyes, and looked at him furtively; but did not move towards him. He, too, was passive and silent. Friends meet with cordial greeting; relatives with kindly platitudes; those who have loved each other to agony dignify reunion by speechless lips and remembering eyes. As he

stood there grand and comely, his short curls showing a brown gold fringe in the fire's glow, she thought—"You are handsomer than ever, Derrick; but if you were made hideous by deformity, my pulses would throb as fast for you."

Then she spoke with constrained voice and downcast head—

"This is a shock to me, as you see. Why have you come in this manner? Why have you come at all?"

Then Derrick's restraint was riven, and he uttered a passionate exclamation, and cast himself at her feet, twining his arms about her.

"Is this all you can find to say to me?" he cried. "How I have thirsted for you! how I have raged for a touch of your sweet face! I have been foolish—faithless, if you will, according to a woman's creed; but my memory has kept faith with you. If a woman is false, she is false with soul as with body. I have erred, I was tempted, I was human; but I swear to you, Nella, that you've been at my heart's core all the while. I never looked into another woman's eyes without seeing yours behind them; never heard her voice without remembering another that I loved more dearly. That woman—how can I say it, even to you? Well; never mind details. I did not urge that step which lost me you; she claimed my protection, saying that her *love* for me had defamed her. She left me a few weeks afterwards for a newer and wealthier rival. I owed her no grudge; for I never loved her. I hope I was kind to her while she was with me. She was a swallow that lived on men's summers; and winter was with me, both of purse and mind. Then I did not dare write to you; women, especially young and pure women, are so implacable to an error like mine. I believe there is no crime you could not forgive sooner than inconstancy. A fellow might be posted at Tatt's, tabooed at clubs, tried at the dock, and found guilty of bloody hands, and you would christen him a martyr and fondle the hands, unless some one told tales of a kiss snatched of the gaoler's daughter;—then he might go hang, veritably outlawed by you at last. Oh, love—love! don't be harsh! Just for one moment put away wrath and misery. Don't grudg~

me this throb of happiness. Thrill me once with your lips, and absolve my sin to them. Such a touch would seal me true to them for ever. I have probed life more deeply than I had when we last wept and parted. All women, compared to you, are failures with me; none other can hold me as you can. You have haunted my life; you can make my future something more than an aimless dream. Dear! take me back! Forgive! forgive!"

He lowered his face in her palms, and burnt them with his tears.

"I love your tears," she thought. "I wish I could cry. You cry because you hope——"

"Derrick!" she said, in an icy voice; "your tears are wasted—it is too late."

"Too late!" he echoed; "don't say so for pity's sake! I came to you directly that woman freed me of her presence. I thought my severance from her might best win me your pardon. I plead for it with all my soul. Be generous, and trust me once more. Do you think I should not be staunch and true with the love of my youth in my arms? Absence is a harder test for a man than a woman, and I have not been faultless; but I swear to you that I have never met the woman I would not leave for you, while I wouldn't leave you for a Mahomet's paradise. Dear! what can I say to make your voice softer to me—your face kinder?"

"It is not unkindness that I feel, it's despair," she said wildly, "Derrick, do you remember how twin our hearts were once?"

"Surely."

"Do you remember how we kept warm one winter's night with clasped arms, calling heaven to witness to the worth of our pledges. No doubts tainted our kiss—I had faith in you, and in that faith was salvation and wreck. You say rightly, men must be judged by a wider margin than women. They can stray, yet be true. Inconstancy to them is a diversion; to a woman it would mean alienation. It is a woman's misfortune that her first love is a religion. She is foolish as the fanatic savage who believes in his fetish, glorifies it with sacrifice, rains tears on its

face when storms ruin his harvest, and beams smiles on it when it has made the sun shine and the grain ripe. One day some well-meaning Christian flings the image to the ground, and shows how delusive was its power for good or evil. It was a cheat; and the poor fool weeps so much for his lost idol and wasted adoration, that he weeps away all capacity for belief in a worthier and purer faith. We were the fools when we trusted each other. 'For ever,' you said, looking at me, as you went your way, on the road that led to another woman. 'For ever,' I said, and I stayed to turn faith into revenge and falsehood. Yet I could love you now——" (the kisses rained thicker on her hands) "—dearly, though in a different way. One only loves *once* like that. But——"

"Don't say *but*, Nella; it's a woman's 'no.'"

"It is 'no.' You do not understand. *It is too late.*"

"No, I do *not* understand," he cried hotly; "but I will seek explanation. Where is your father?"

"Ah! you do not know about it. I feared so. You would not have come, had you known. Must I tell him? I can't! I can't!"

She turned her white face away from him, and muttered something about wishing for death.

"Die!" he cried exultantly. "Why I'm just beginning to live again, now that I have got you back. I *have* got you back; haven't I, dear?" he added, in a softer tone; and he knelt by her side, and put out meek, entreating hands in search of hers. She put them away.

"You had no right to come," she moaned. "After you wrote me that answer, you had no further right in me. I did not care what became of me, and Mr. Rolfe was very kind; and, oh, Derrick, look at my left hand. Don't you now understand how it is too late for us to meet again?"

"Nella! Nella!" he panted. "You say this to punish me. Put your lips to mine—so—*now*, can you say it again? Not another man's wife—that isn't what you meant. Say it is not true, dear—speak, Nella!" seizing her hands.

"It hurts you, does it?" she said, with a dreary look. "Well, think how it hurt me when I was told you had taken that woman to your arms. I am married, De"



But I was less false to my love than you ; for I married out of sheer pity——”

He plucked away his hands, rose and stood away from her.

“ Now I can't even touch you,” he cried, in a voice of anguish. “ You are horrible to me—you're another man's property ; and I—I love you still and so loathe the sight of you.”

“ Don't torture yourself with images of our happiness,” she said. “ I might retort with your own argument, and remind you that one may kiss two people, and yet only feel the lips of one ; but, besides, the amenities that passed between my husband and myself have been of a peculiar description. I have sometimes taken his hands, but it was to hold them down ; he sometimes put his arms about my neck, but it was with the amiable intention of treating me as poulterers do fowls that are fit for market.”

He did not heed her, but went and sat by the table, and dropped his head on his arms.

“ Oh ! ” he groaned ; “ to have no pleasure in her ; to come home to this ! I have been all penitence and humiliation to no purpose. I have thought of her in my sleep, and struck out my arms to catch hold of her. She turned to air ; but there was no poison in it.” He lifted his head, and looked at her. “ It is a pain to see you ; but I want to realize it. There is no sweetness in you ; the music has gone out of your voice. I thought it lovely just now, even when it blamed me, before you spoke of your foulness. Coarse words, aren't they ? To all others you may be a Lucretia of matrons ; but to the man who worshipped your face when it was unsoiled, you are foul. Mind you, a woman may be caressed by her first lover, and keep her modesty ; but his successor taints her lips, blisters her soul with frequency. Your beauty is damnable to me ; the sweet face is scarred by that other's touches.”

“ You speak strongly—you who were the first to break pact,” she said bitterly.

“ Because, as I have said, the cases are different. There is only one barrier between a woman and hell ; there are dozens for a man to face and be restrained by. In the eyes of the world you are spotless, of course ; it is only to

me you are a fallen star, dropped from the heaven where I worshipped you, and turned to clay at my feet. Only to me—you are lost; and with you, all is lost!" he added drearily. "The rest of life will be as tame as an old song."

He rose to go, still shaken by his storm of feeling. His strong hands trembled, and his face looked livid, even in the warm fire-glow.

She held out her hands pleadingly. "You are unkind," she began. "I——" then fell to weeping, and could speak no more.

He lingered, looking at her with wrathful eyes, but inwardly melting at the sight of her distress; her calm had exasperated him, it seemed so like indifference.

"I'm glad to cry," she gasped; "they have been burning my lids ever since you were here; but they would not come—it was too hopeless to weep about."

"Why do you cry now, then?" he asked in a softened tone, bending near her to catch her answer, until his lips hovered about her hair in their crave to touch it.

"Because I seemed to taste all my agony at once when you turned to go; because I seemed then to see all my future at one glance—the crawling, sluggish hours, merciless in their precision; winter within and without; low clouds that sulk all day over the stream yonder; then a dismal flame in the west; to be succeeded by the weird dawning in the east; drifting nearer and nearer to the last great shadow of all; but never to see your face by the way, never know your thoughts! I see you to-day, have heard you, and touched you. My eyes, ears, and lips have got their last blessing of you. Now we shall part for ever. We were silent to-night at meeting, dumb for old love's sake! How will it be with us when we meet again? Do you think disembodied spirits greet each other, Derrick? Does the glory of that great revivification awe their eyes into blindness of the old dear faces? If memory lives there, I shall be with you once more—and now, good-bye, my first and only love!"

Again she held out her hands, and this time he took them and gathered her to his breast.

"At least let the jar between us cease," she pleaded.

"It is too late for happiness ; let it be too late for anger."

"Am I forgiven?" he murmured.

"Am I forgiven?" she echoed.

And the old love dominated once more on those two.

Presently she looked at him jealously, and asked—

"Was she beautiful?"

"Yes," Derrick answered, with thoughtless candour.

Whereupon she chilled a little, and hung away from him.

"Dear!" he cried, "there has been no beauty like yours to me, for I love you. Have you any defects? I don't know; but be sure if you have, they are lovelier to me than any other woman's graces."

She clung to him once more, comforted, although she was bidding him farewell.

"Go," she said; but his disobedience was sweet to her.

"I am going," he sighed, but lingered, dreading to hear his retreating footsteps sounding "finis."

Again she fancied the sound of distant laughter.

"Hark!" she said, lifting up a pale scared face; "do you hear *that*?"

"No. What is it?"

"It is my duty, it is coming to seek me. Duties always do; pleasures rarely, I think. Oh, Derrick! if you love me, go from me at once."

He released her and passed away from the room, by the same method by which he had entered. Once more came the blast of fresh air, the faint scent of crushed flowers. The pane was darkened, then bright again with moon rays, which shone into a room full of demure sounds, such as the clock ticking, the cat purring, the coals dropping through the grate bars.

Derrick Erle looked back once into the chamber. "She is gone," he thought. "Gone to *him*," and he strode away quickly.

But Nella still lingered, although he could not see her from where he stood. She watched and listened until mist hid his form and distance his footsteps. Then, with a sudden impulse, she turned her tear-worn eyes in search of heaven. "Deliver us from evil," she moaned. "If

there is help for such as me, help me to remember those words ; for how can I live without seeing him again ? If he should ask it, let me be deaf ; if he should write it, let me be blind ; if my heart knows it, let it be still, even unto death. Deliver me from evil. Keep me from temptation !”





## CHAPTER XXXII.

### FAREWELL GOES OUT SIGHING.

**A**ND the "world ran merry as heretofore," just as if these two were not what is called broken-hearted. That seemed the strangest part of it to them; they who seemed to come to a sudden block in existence.

Derrick left Nella saying that his life was at an end; but even as he said it he was unconsciously planning a new world for himself. Not a bright one. Nothing could look bright to him yet awhile; but a sphere of action which might help him to live down the old, fair world, which his own weakness had marred for him. "I suffer, but I will *do*," is the man's cry. "I suffer and must *be*," is the woman's moan. If the man's aims do not always end in results, he, at least, does not feel helpless. A woman is a wing-pruned bird; but he can lift pinions in support of his errant impulse.

So Derrick thought vaguely of wars and foreign lands and a Bohemian existence as he left the woman he loved; and the woman thus left could only pray that he might not return. There was nothing else for her to do. She might not go out and seek fresh fortunes and new hope; she must sit still and face a chasm of empty life, which sickened her in anticipation.

Derrick went to his home with his heart very hard against his mother; but for her he might yet be happy.

Lady Dionysia bore his sternness meekly, as became a woman who had gained her point. She felt she could have embraced that blessed Helen of Indian notoriety who had so unexpectedly come to her aid. She would have done anything in the world for her, except recognise her in society.

"I'll go back and marry her," Derrick said vindictively to his mother; but in his heart he knew that that pretty inanity who had cost him so dear had remitted the worst part of his retribution when she bestowed himself and her folly on another.

The idea of India was given up, and the daily comforts of a luxurious household by degrees reconciled him to absence from lands where the *Times* newspaper would be, as he expressed it, "wild" as birds at Christmas. As to wars, there were none astir at the time; and after a few weeks of brooding, succeeded by restless discontent, Derrick began to consider his mother's proposition, that he should exchange from his present regiment to one in the Household Brigade. "He will soon be cured of his love-sick folly there," Lady Dionysia thought with satisfaction when she read of his being gazetted to the "Rapids." And if a broken constitution can be relied on to heal a broken heart, Derrick was in good company for mental disorders.

"Is he thinking of me?" Nella sometimes asked herself.

He did think of her often; but she now came between other thoughts. He sought distraction and found it; she sought forgetfulness, and could not find it. Each was constant after their different natures. He pursued pleasure the better to dim her image; she imposed mental toil on herself with a like object. But where he partially succeeded, she utterly failed. Her face now and then came between him and that of some other woman, and spoiled the latter of its beauty; her remembered voice sometimes made him pause in the mind-enfeebling career to which he had given himself up; but he abode with her always. Her mind grew, but he was carven on its growth as deeply as was his name on the elm they had lingered under in summer time. As the flames of her intelligence

burned higher and clearer, her lover's image showed glorious as a pebble glowed on by the northern lights.

Meanwhile Derrick began to hold a low opinion of womankind. The "Rapids" discouraged belief in women as antithetical to their firm faith in themselves.

Derrick was living what is called a "fast life," such as generally ends in stagnation of mind and body. Fast livers lose the look of the man and show the slaves in their faces; and from being your own slave, to becoming that of your enemy, is (as France has taught us) the work of a brief space.

Derrick had not been many weeks with the "Rapids" ere he had subscribed to most of the articles of their creed:—

"We believe in ourselves.

"Next to ourselves, the rest of the brigade.

"We believe in boredom.

"We believe in our victims (feminine).

"We believe in our tailors, hatters, and bootmakers.

"The rest is chaos."

Their motto was, "Sceptic in all else;" their badge, a sheep's head fringed with wolf-skin; their mania (Le Sage says we all have one) was to be ashamed of their virtues and exaggerate their vices. They were, in the main, unoffending and ornamental members of society; not nearly so given to indulge in wild displays of muscular strength and reckless ostentation as some of their admiring biographers have asserted; for little sleep and much alcohol are more favourable to the Apollo than the Hercules type of physique, and the incomes of cadets of noble families are not always commensurate with a taste for Oriental magnificence. Still it was the right thing, being a "Rapid," to appear such. The danger for Derrick was that he was still so young as to be very much in earnest, and all those faculties, which under a different training might have exalted him, were so many more elements in his self-degradation. His mental fibres turned to pulp, and the devil of satiety soon possessed him as completely as it did some of his older comrades; in-

deed, he scandalised his mentors by adding his own formula to the "Rapid" creed—"We are the greatest bores of all."

He wrote to his mother, "I hope you are content now that I am sick of everything and everybody."

"He would have been sick of her too by this time, if he had had his way," the mother said phlegmatically; "my husband would be sick of me, if he dared."

Nella, leading her quiet toneless life, knew nothing—and had she known, would have believed nothing of Derrick's deterioration; our first love is always our first love, nothing can lessen that proud word "first." She knew little of the "Rapids," but knew that cowardice did not enter into their traditions; their names had been thick on the head-roll which England counted with hushed breath after that Sabbath dawn at Inkermann, when a tiny army of her sons (God bless them!) added five splendid hours to her immortality. To a woman, especially a young woman, physical courage ranks the highest of man's virtues. It is not until we have passed the heyday of romance that we estimate sobriety, frugality, and such-like commonplaces at their true worth.

One day, Derrick said to himself, "I must see her."

Who has not been at times possessed by these sudden yearnings—sick folk for the sea, old men for their boyish playgrounds, friends barred from each other by a blank of years?

He went down to Vere, timing his visit so as to arrive when Nella would be alone. That Mr. Vere was in London he knew; he also knew Mrs. Chaunter's dinner-hour.

Mrs. Rolfe was out," the old servant said. "Had he any message to leave?"

"I will wait," Derrick answered briefly, and entered the sitting-room.

Nella's bird pruned its feathers by the fire, Nella's dog gave him cheerful recognition, nothing was changed. There was the engraving on the wall which they had both forgotten to notice when they looked at it together, and which they would yet remember through all life. There were her books, a motley collection, on the writing-table,



and various fragments of her own thoughts scrawled in a MS. volume.

"Paolo and Francesca once lost each other in hell. It was then they first discovered they *were* in hell, and it was then Giovanni was first avenged.

"What said Rosaline when she heard of Romeo and Juliet's fate? Was she not hard on the silly sheep?

"Will Swinburne never write the tragedy (the direst in history) of Katharine Howard? Who could deal so well with the characters of the King and bold Francis Derham; and with the subtle mixture of feeling with which Katharine must have regarded the lover whose very existence was a menace which only ended with the axe?

"How strange to look at a man you have loved and think, 'It is you who are murdering me. A little while ago you gave me plight-tokens, silk heart's-case and a French fennel; these things pleased the little girl and are slaying the Queen.' The nightmare of Derham's presence culminates in the fatal rustle of Cranmer's robes, coming to preach mercy when there is no mercy, the passionate anguish of the royal Moloch, who mourns a pretty toy lost ere he had grown fatigued of it; and the last heart-terror on Tower Hill.—Could Henry have believed in eternity?

"What is the line in poetry most suggestive of remote charm?

"Keats'—

"'On perilous seas in faery lands forlorn;'

"Thomson's—

"'Plac'd far amid the melancholy main;'

"Or Shelley's—

"'Winds that bear sweet music when they breathe  
Through some dim latticed chamber?'

"Byron is a fine poet, but Shelley is a creator of poets.

"Why is Lord Lytton's Essay on Goldsmith more in tune with its subject than Macaulay's? Is Macaulay's handling too vehement for so delicate a bloom?

"Was Tennyson driven to write 'Ask me no more' by Shakespeare's line—

"And all in vain you strive against the stream?"

"What known instance expresses the most profound physical desolation? Probably that of the last survivor of Knight's expedition to Hudson Bay. All had died but two. Those gentle fish-faced little people, the Esquimaux, told Hearne the end of the story. At last only two were left, and 'these two,' they said, 'used often to go to the top of a rock and look out earnestly, as if for a vessel coming for their relief. Then they would sit down close together, and weep bitterly. At last one died, and the other, in trying to dig him a grave, fell down and died too.'

"Did those melancholy watchers ever dream of old summers and the time of the singing of birds; of hamlets twinkling in green clefts of sea-downs; of cottage pales, nodded over by hollyhocks, and peered through by their youngest born? If so, what could surpass the grim despair of their awakening?

"Of mental griefs, the most acute is said to be—

*'Che ricordarse del tempo felice  
Nella misera.'*

"I doubt. To me, of all fables, the saddest is that of Eurydice—her whose lover went into sunshine, leaving her hopeless in hell.

"Derrick's old regiment was a distinguished one, so is his present one. He has linked himself to two great traditions, that is something. I can link myself to nothing.

"In Dora's house, life's current runs brightly—children pattering about the stairs—some one to watch depart and return.

"To be numb is not to be at rest, but it is better than being racked. God keep him from me!"

These last words had been written in pencil, and partially obliterated, but Derrick understood them.

"It shall be as you wish," he said hotly, "but, oh, how I am aching for you!" He fixed his eyes on the door

half hoping that it might open and reveal his desire. He heard steps in the distance; his pulse throbbed, and his face grew white.

He remembered the story of Jairus vaguely, and wondered how he felt when he got back his dead. Was there not something awful in that ecstasy—something which held him still and trembling, as Derrick was trembling now?

The footsteps—a woman's by their lightness—passed on.

"Nella!" he called, "Nella!" but there was no answer, and his eyes fell once more on the pencilled scrap of paper. "I will go," he groaned, "I will go;" but he stooped down and added a line under her reference to Orpheus and Eurydice—

"Most curst of all was he, to whom 'twas given  
To shrink from earth as hell—and pine for hell as heaven."

Then he left the house. He paused on the bridge that spanned the mere, and looked back. A woman's face was visible at one of the windows, but she made no sign, only looked at him, until the path was empty of him, and the sun's wan rays, in which he had moved, had passed to the westward osiers, touching their sharp sides with light. He passed away down the dusky road, understanding that she had known of his presence, and had purposely kept aloof. As he realized her resistance, the desire to see her again grew intense.

"I will see her again," he vowed; and Nella, turning from the window to the homeless shadows within, cried fiercely, "I have done well, and I hate myself for it."





## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### NEST IN HARBOUR.

**I**N the last days of March the Alymers came home. Too late to have the heir born at the Limes, as Mr. Alymer had wished; too late, perhaps, to restore his own health; for shortly after the birth of his son, he had been seized with a fit of paralysis, but he had a firm conviction that home, and nothing but home, would serve to heal him. And Nest, stricken to the heart by grief and self-reproach, hastened to return to the Limes as speedily as her husband's condition permitted of his being removed.

Even that blithe, lovely burthen at her breast could not comfort her while its father was as helpless as itself, and his speech scarcely more coherent.

"I wish I had never left home!" she moaned; and Mr. Alymer echoed that word, or something intended to represent it, incessantly during their journey to England.

On the mountain roads, when Nest called his attention to the sudden brightness of the stream-washed rocks, when her eyes took content from the slumbrous beauty of blue curves of sea, his were still restless and seeking. When at Mentone she pointed out of the window to the purple float of hills specked by the golden orange globes, he looked away from the sky-line to the number of "Bradshaw," and asked "how many days?" There was no content in his face, until one evening he drove through the level roads that led to his own park-gate; the budding

hedgerows were lovelier to him than all the flushed Italian villages he had left nestling 'twixt blue and blue on the Cornice hills. The sight of his shepherd driving a flock across the pastures—of his house, showing pink through gaps in the woodland, and finally—of the mossy griffins that guarded his lodge-gate, brought a light into his face which the glories of gorgeous aisles and palaces had never reflected there.

As they drove up the long gravel path, which wound like a golden snake through dusky hollows and meadows open to the sun, they could see their hall-door flung back in welcome. A group of servants were in attendance on the steps, and amongst them moved two or three agitated specks.

"Dogs," gurgled Mr. Alymer, with a gleam in his eyes, as they drew near. The dogs stood transfixed, with stiff ears and excited tails; then broke into a clamour of delight, and rushed to meet their master. He made an effort to answer their caresses, and nearly wept at his inability to pat them a welcome. Don trotted by his master's litter, with a jealous air, as the party moved into the library; he seemed relieved at finding no further exit was contemplated by his master to-day. To the dogs, the front door was a symbol of treachery and desertion.

When the novelty of his return had worn off, a deep gloom seemed to fall on Mr. Alymer. The familiar scenes for which he had longed in absence reminded him of so many lost pleasures—pleasures which might never be retasted while the death-like feeling held his limbs. The morning after his arrival he sat by his library window, looking at his horses and dogs; Nest had left the room, thinking that he would be sufficiently amused for the next few minutes, to enable her to take a peep of that pink and white joy, which she was never tired of eyeing, even though her looking glass was opposite. Such miracles will maternity accomplish!

Mr. Alymer nodded his head in approbation of one horse; shook it in condemnation of another. He was shy of speaking to his servants, his speech being impaired and difficult to comprehend. He was scrutinising a favourite old hunter, with eyes aglow with memories,

when he heard a sound which made him try to wave the horse and groom aside. Failing this, he called out excitedly, "Get over!" The words were blurred, and nearly unintelligible to the servant; but the horse answered to his voice, and moved slightly to the right.

The sounds grew clearer; the groom stood on tiptoe and stared hard; the paralytic at the window looked with equal intentness; the horse had his ears, eye, and nose alert, and lifted his head anxiously; a cat, sunning herself on the terrace, put off her air of domesticity and scrambled up a tree; a man ran down to the bridge that spanned the water, and flung open the gates; Nest at the window, where she was dandling her babe, looked at the scene with a softer feeling than would have filled her before her heart had grown big with the touch of those dimpled fists.

What a lovely day, and what a pretty picture it made, that swift panorama that was flashing towards them, through its still setting of clear sky and gold-green meadows.

"I wish they weren't running after anything," sighed Nest the mother, forgetful of some of the sporting instincts of Nest the coquette.

The boy on her arm puffed his cheeks with delight. "Pretty red men!" he babbled.

Meanwhile, Mr. Alymer had made signs to his valet to wheel him out on the terrace, where he could see more distinctly the action of the horses as they jumped the distant fence line that separated park from field.

"Well done! Clever grey that! Kicked himself off it like a workman. 'Tis an awkwardish double, but the old horse always cleared it when he was in spirits. By George, the brown has blundered in—the man's rolled under him, and a woman is clearing the lot! Just like 'em—never look where they're going to. There's Cornyear, the farmer, making for the gate; he always had a natural tendency to them—like his own cattle. What a pace they're coming! Oh, to be moving again! Oh, to be able to fling a leg over Katty there!" The man in the chair thought these things, while his horse, happier than himself, kept in a perpetual play of movement.

Over the dim sketch of a hedgerow the red specks came thicker and faster. The hounds, swift as fire and as eager, streamed like a pale compact flame towards the water. In an instant the lake became hurried by movement; its heavy blue face was touched by broken lights and foamy eddies. The pack had swarmed in, and swam from bank to bank; horsemen galloping about the brink, scared the wild-fowl with their cheering, and reflected fitful red shadows in the water; others clattered over the bridge. As the hounds gathered their sleek sides into close formation once more, seeking the fox's secret in reed and willow, their excitement seemed to pass into Squire Alymer's face, as with lips quivering with yearning, he answered the salutations of his passing friends, and gave utterance to a terrible cry—terrible to his wife, who hastened quickly to his side—unintelligible to many of the passers-by, but quite coherent to the ears of the huntsman and his whippers-in.

"Did you hear the old Squire, *Jem*?" one said to the other, "he was a trying a view-halloo, just like a Christian."

The hounds understood that scream; it put fresh fury into their movement. The old horse described rapid half circles.

"Is she fit, *Jem*?" muttered Mr. Alymer. The groom interpreted the words by the aid of his wishes.

"Fit as a fiddle, sir," he said briskly. "Did a four-mile trot this morning. 'Twould (with a wistful look at the retreating pack) "do her good, sir, to have a gallop."

"Then go."

*Jem* required no further word, but was on and forward in an instant; the old mare's tail whisking furiously.

"D—— it, sir, not the gate!" screamed the Squire. He wanted the pleasure of seeing the fence taken in the old mare's old form.

Nest gave utterance to a musical scream, "The fence, *Jem*!" she said with emphasis.

*Jem* heard and obeyed; went straight at a stiff quickset hedge, which the mare cleared as if it were a toy hurdle.

"Well done, brave old girl! there's no one like you, none!" Mr. Alymer babbled, with glistening eyes. And

who of us has not at some time or other discovered the seventh wonder of the world in the animal to whom we owe infinite pleasure and gratitude ?

"Got me safe through that nasty place, did you, where young Crowfler came on his head ? Carried me like a bird over that stile, which turned all the field, making me M. F. H., whips and field, all in one. Went gallantly at that rotten bank, when tired in all but heart ; and when you fell wouldn't kick me, though I lay jammed between your heels. All these services have given me such a regard for you, that I'll sell you at the end of the season for ten pounds more than I gave for you. Indeed, remembering your gallantry and talents, it should be twenty pounds ; or, if my wife makes a row at parting with old Sam, I'll turn you out in a paddock, and cherish you in your old age. What if the wind seems unaccountably bleak after many years of sheltered life ? What if the joints ache from rheumatism ; the feet grow splayed from neglect ; the back raw with the flies, that exult in a well-bred coat ? What if the diet, which was strengthening and rich when it paid me to give it to you, has vanished, leaving in its place infinitesimal bites of herbage, with which to sustain the weakness of age ? What if your fine mane is thick with scurf—your sides scarred with the grip of the playful young colts, your companions ? What of all this, if I can comfort myself for the terrorism exercised on me by my wife, for reflecting what a kind master I am to poor old Sam, who used to carry me so splendidly, and whose tail, when he is dead, shall wave amongst the trophies of our glorious hours together ?"

But Mr. Alymer's mare would never meet with such a too common fate. Katty would live on the best until her master died, at which time she was to be shot. For, as he had said in a testamentary letter—"I like my old mare too well to let her depend on any one's kindness but my own."

As the tumult of the hunt died away, Mr. Alymer looked into his wife's eyes piteously.

"They're all gone," he said, "even Katty ; but the old man will never ride again ; never again, Nest !"

Nest stooping over his hand to clasp and kiss it, suddenly looked up with quivering face.



"Where did you see the fox go, Ben?" she cried suddenly.

As suddenly Mr. Alymer's hand made a perceptible movement.

"There," he answered; looking down he saw, with a strange mixture of terror and joy, that his forefinger was lifted to corroborate his words; saw this, and felt that his will had some power over his arm.

"What is it, Nest, what does it mean?"

"It means—oh, Ben! I do think and hope it means, a step towards recovery. Can you bend the arm, Ben?"

"Yes, yes! Oh, God be praised! I can feel it once more. I know that I *have* an arm. Don't go, Nest! I am so shaken; so nervous with hope."

"I'll be back in an instant," Nest said, with soft choked tones, and disappeared; then, presently, was at his side again, a wondering pair of blue eyes staring over her shoulder. She placed the babe gently in the circle of the father's arm.

"You have never held him before," she cried, with tearful triumph; "the first use you make of your arm shall be to nurse your son, Ben." And the quiet night darkened on their great content.





## CHAPTER XXXIV.

"LOVE'S NOT TIME'S FOOL."

**I**T is late in August, and it is rather more than two years since Nella Rolfe looked from her window, feeling as if her own hard resolve was the stone which had crushed her heart to powder.

They had not met again. "That is right," she said. But right was hard fare to live on, and turned life to petrification. Two summers and two winters had come and gone. She knew that much, and so did the sun-dial on the lawn; also she read a good deal. She avoided poetry and read of facts. Poetry was instinct with passion and colour—to read a love verse of Browning's was to feel the heart leap, and say, "He is here—my love, we shall touch hands directly." The rich suggestiveness of those human dramas made her monotony more intolerable, her future more bleak.

Nest Alymer, who could divine another woman's feelings as aptly as her own little dog could unearth the bones his fellow-creatures had hidden, marvelled at Nella's constancy of idea.

"I never could manage *not* to be tired of an admirer in two months," she said. "What a sad thing it is for a woman to be brought up in that single-minded sort of way! Instead of treasuring her heart like a rich wedding-cake, giving a piece here and there (and no man is worth more), she squanders it all in a lump. A woman who has been in love a few times knows how to equipoise men's value properly."

"With whom are you measuring me now?" her husband asked blithely, and with no acid in his tone of jest. Little Benjie had linked the pair in unalterable love and trust.

"That is different," Nest answered with her hand involuntarily caressing his. "We are one now; but in truth, Ben, I think that if law did not bind people together they would feel as children do by dolls:—'Now, my dear, I've looked at your face until it has lost all entity. I've turned you inside out, and know every paper and rag you're composed of. Your voice has got squally (now don't make it worse by howling), and I've seen a new doll at Cremer's. Her face is lovely. It is the exact opposite of what yours used to be—for I have no idea what it is like now. I do not know what is the quality of her paper and rags, but I dream that they are very superior. It is for your own sake that I go. I cannot make you happy. I will always be your friend. Heaven bless you.'"

"I never wish for any other puppet, Nest. You suffice me," Ben said tenderly.

"That is *because* you have me," Nest replied promptly. "You are by nature staid, and love the creature near to you; but most people hanker after the remoter charm. Remember Shelley, who married in his second wife the woman of his passion, and then wrote his most exquisite poem on some one, who was certainly not Mary Godwin, whoever she might have been. Look at Byron leaving the Guiccioli for Greece, and calling his departure duty. I know it was *ennui*."

"Napoleon said the word impossible was not French, and I'm quite sure *ennui* is not English, and that no one mentally and physically healthy has any right to feel it," grumbled Mr. Alymer. "Nella Rolfe would do better to enjoy such blessings as she possesses, good health and a fine income, than to be perpetually staring at a ruin she can't rebuild. Poor thing!" he added, with softening voice; "it is a terrible fate. I wonder if there's no chance of Walter's recovery."

Nest shook her head. "No chance, by the doctor's account. Fortunately his fancies are generally bright ones now, and his life, though it may be a long, need not be a painful one. It is hard on his wife, whom he will not

admit to his sight; but it serves her right for having schemed to marry him," Nest added virtuously.

"How do you know she did scheme?"

"By instinct," was the prompt answer.

"You overshoot the mark, my dear," Ben said placidly, "as women of—ahem—your experience and training are apt to do. You don't understand, as you have just confessed, these one-idea'd natures. A country girl, bred in the silence of her own thoughts, is very different from your town flocks, all standing a-tiptoe, and wrangling like the cockatoos at the Zoo for the biggest morsel."

"Human nature, and above all woman nature," observed Nest sententiously, "was the same in Eden as it is in Belgravia. Not but what I will ask Mrs. Rolfe here, and do my best to amuse her. Although I shall never forgive her for having flung herself at poor Walter's head when it wasn't strong enough to bear it, and so got the better of him."

"She is your cousin now, and so you ought to make the best of her," Mr. Alymer said gravely. "Of course, in poor Walter's state, she does well to live quietly; but moping is not good for the moral health. I have a theory that a large acquaintance is an antidote against sin."

"What can I do for her?" Nest said, with a pettish gesture. "I can't 'minister to a mind diseased,' Ben."

"No, but you can ask her to dinner," Ben said prosaically. And having prescribed the Englishman's elixir for "all earthly ills," he concentrated his attention on the *Times* newspaper—a hint for silence which all good wives should take.

A few days later and Nest's summer guests began to arrive, and she bethought herself of her implied promise to her husband.

"About this time everybody in town begins to look unwholesome, and those who can, follow the example of the geraniums in their balconies, which have to be planted out in the country to regain colour and vitality," she wrote to Nella. "Consequently, my dear Mrs. Rolfe, if you and your father will join my guests this week you will have the pleasure of hearing the freshest scandals and seeing the most faded toilettes of the season. You will meet

some old friends. Miss Carnegie and Miss Seton are here; they desire to be kindly remembered to you. Lady Dionysia Erle is also expected, and a host of others."

The sting lay in the postscript:—

"*On dit* that our old friend Derrick Erle is going to be married."

That will bring her, Nest thought. "She will want to know what his bride is like." Nest wished Mrs. Rolfe to come. By the time her visitors had been a few days in the house every one was tired of every one else, and confided the same (under a courteous seal of secrecy) to every one in turn.

"Something fresh," was their cry, and Nella would be a novelty to the majority of them.

"Quite a quiet party; merely a few personal friends," Mrs. Alymer had assured Nella.

The few friends numbered twelve, and consisted of Miss Carnegie, asked because she was beautiful; Miss Seton, because she was talkative; Mr. Icon, the artist, because he painted female heads exquisitely, and might introduce some of his friends into his great picture of "The Graces at their Toilettes" (the toilettes in the background), which was to appear in next year's Academy; Mr. Rufus, because he was a clever young writer and ultra-radical, whom it was thought advisable by some to coax, as timid folk do the dog they may have to pass in the dark. Then there was Colonel Busbie, a strict Conservative and disciplinarian, who declared that a universal conscription could alone preserve England's freedom; and Lady Comet, who was considered fast—indeed, her friends had their hands up, only waiting for Sir Ainslie Comet to give the signal for a general stoning. This, at present, he obtusely omitted to do. They were disappointed, but consoled themselves by eating his excellent dinners and pitying him behind his back. In attendance on Lady Comet was a pet dog, a pet Guardsman, and her husband. The dog had the best of it; his mistress was really fond of him, and he possessed some original ideas. Sir Ainslie only had those his wife instilled into him; and Mr. Hylas, of the Tepids, had none. He knew that the Tepids were very superior to those "duffing Rapids," and that the Rapids, in their

turn, were of a higher class of Being than the "Liners, and *that* lot." Also he was aware that he was irresistible. But he had these sentiments on loan:—the first from his regiment; the second from those young ladies whose admiration for his future prospects (he was the only son of a rich *parvenu*) found expression in adoration for himself. Should he ever leave the Tepids and marry, these ideas would have to revert to his successor.

There was a little old Scotch peer who played the piano, and was given to wandering away from society into those mysterious music-lands where hearts grow big and eyes fill with humid light from inexplicable causes.

"Who is that strumming away dismal little tunes on the piano?" young Hylas would ask, when an opening door admitted a bar of *Lochaber* between the rattle of the billiard-balls and the convulsive hissing of soda water.

"Oh, it's only old Lochfyne," was the slighting answer.

Only old Lochfyne recapturing his youth with the love-ballad of "Blink o'er the burn," or soothing the terrors of futurity with Handel's pæans of hope.

Mr. Hylas remarks "That he never—aw—does music or that sort of thing himself, but doesn't object to it when it's lively;" and shouts out an entreaty to the musician to strike up the last new comic tune, of which he remembers neither words nor air, but knows that it is very jolly.

Mr. Jules Gysart, an actor of repute as a light comedian, completed the number of Mrs. Alymer's guests. Mr. Gysart had played so many parts that mentally he was supple as his brethren in a lower walk of life—those contortionists whose mission in the world is to look at it through their legs. Natural tact more than supplied the place of the social status which goes to form what is called a gentleman. And if Mr. Gysart could not help privately studying Captain Hylas as a good "Character Swell," he showed no sign of his purpose, only now and then regarding the officer with a pensive air, which rather flattered the latter.

"Deuced clever fellar Gysart; always listens to what I've got to say."

And Captain Hylas's thoughts reverted with bitterness

to his brother officers, who did not often so compliment him.

\* \* \* \* \*

"It is a long time since we dined at the Limes," said Mr. Vere, settling himself in a cozy nook of his cozy brougham. "Eh, Nella?"

"A long time," she echoed. "A lifetime ago," she thought.

"It was in Pasquinade's year. Dear me, how time flies, and what a lot of good horses have come and gone since then," Mr. Vere added sentimentally.

Time was flying blithely for Mr. Vere. Fortune had been, as he phrased it, at her "womanish tricks," and had lavished favours on him when he no longer sought them.

"Time flies."

His daughter looked at him with grave, contented eyes. She was glad to see him happy, with no heavier sigh on his lips than that gentle one he had just breathed, and which was given to the future of some Phoenix among thoroughbreds which might exist for a new generation of racing men.

"I wonder if I gambled, or smoked, or drank, whether I could get out of this frozen-pond sort of life?" she thought.

The last two of the four years that seemed to Mr. Vere to have scrambled past him so gaily, had been for her all stagnation. She had studied, she had made holiday, she had smiled, danced, and wept; her outside life had fluctuated as any other's might have done; but within her was petrification. She could not escape from her thralldom. She was vexed with herself for its persistence—a mouse in a bowl, an eel in a frozen pool. She had no more strength nor freedom than these, she thought; but she was becoming accustomed, if not resigned to, the monotony of her days when she received Mrs. Alymer's letter.

"I thought I had forgotten," she cried to herself, as the tumult waxed greater in her thoughts. "I thought I was dead because I was numb."

"Going to be married." She did not much believe that. He who had made part of her existence so long

would surely not transfer all her old rights to another without giving her warning. She was too inexperienced to know that while courtesy regulates nearly every mercantile transaction in life, men not unfrequently treat the women they have adored with less civility than they would show their club porters.

But it would be better to go amongst people who could tell her something of him, even such things as these, than to live any longer with this dead wall of silence between her days and his. Thick tears relieve a pressing sorrow, but who can guard against grief's refractions? You have forgotten grief awhile; you are pulling flowers, or singing a tune, or laughing with your friend, or running in the wind, and in a flash some one who is gone or dead stretches out quick arms and holds you. "Oh, come back and fill my life again!" you cry in that heart-shudder, and lo, it is gone. It was a shadow of the past, just enough to make you moan for the substance, and the sickness of the blank it leaves is sorrow's acme.

"Just one glimpse of him, then I will come back to my prison," reasoned Nella, when she accepted Mrs. Alymer's invitation. To hear his name—that would not be much; but a crumb is sweet to the famished, and she was so weary of her famine.

It was twilight, and the road between Vere Court and the Limes had put off its work-a-day look and become dream-like—a vague roadway, wandering between two shadows. A grassy nook by the hedge-side was scarred by gipsy fires; a darkling wood showed a red hedge of sunset through its bars; men slouching away from the weary fields, turned bleared, tired faces towards the occupants of Mr. Vere's carriage as it rolled swiftly by them; a shepherd-lad was eating his supper-crust on a gate, a hungry-eyed vagrant slackening his pace near a turnip-field, while the clang clang of the Limes' dinner-bell found its echoes in hills beyond the deep woods and level sky-flames.

Such was the scene, and Nella carried some of its suggestions with her to the rich man's dinner-table, where food was wasted in refinements and unconsumed for daintiness.



"I flatter myself," Mr. Vere said, with a complacent glance at his daughter, "that you are very different from the shabby Cinderella whom those women flouted when last you met them. I shall enjoy to see them eyeing those pearls. I never saw a more beautiful necklace."

Yes, she was different; more beautiful by four of the loveliest years of a woman's life. She was dressed in perfect taste. The white sheen of her silk dress was dimmed by the faint shadows of rare lace. She had a necklet of pearls about her throat which were of infinite value. With a sudden glow in her dark eyes, she asked—

"Do you really think that to be principal doll in a fashion picture is everything?"

"It is always sweet to be first in everything," Mr. Vere said sententiously. He was in high spirits, proud of his daughter, content with himself. He had given no thought to the hungry beggar, or the ill-fed lad on the gate. He was too happy, now-a-days, to be observant of others' ills.

Oh, to be foolish and blushing again, to wear a shabby dress, and be oppressed by all those insolent faces, if only she might know the scent of a certain yellow rose, and the sweet brief greeting in that dusky corridor!

"I wonder if the China roses are in bloom still," she said half aloud, as the carriage stopped at the door of the Limes.

"I wonder if they still have their excellent French cook. He could do more than create a dish—he could create a taste," quoth Mr. Vere.





## CHAPTER XXXV.

### JOURNEYS END IN LOVERS MEETING.

**T**HE second dinner-bell had sounded, and its devotees were huddled in groups, in Mrs. Alymer's drawing-room, after the fashion of sheep that have not decided in which direction to graze. Conversation was carried on in spasms. The evening was sultry.

At an open window stood Lord Lochfyne, shrouded by the muslin curtains, and hearkening to a thrush praising life in the laurel glooms. Captain Hylas found a listener in Lady Comet.

"Of all the boring hours of the day, the hour before dinner is the greatest bore," he complained. "A man can't settle his mind to anything when anything important is coming off, you know."

Mr. Gysart looked critically at the window, which framed a dim picture of evening, in which a pale star was beginning to twinkle.

"A pretty set scene," he thought, "but it wants a strong practical moon to throw out that group of firs."

Mrs. Alymer entered the room, and the social frost thawed somewhat. Lady Comet withdrew the pretty foot, which had been tilted for effect on a hassock. Miss Carnegie moved her head from its *pose* near Mr. Icon's.

Both ladies looked askance at Nest, as our blue-jackets in the Crimea might have done at the Zouaves, who were confessedly so much their superiors in the art of speculation.

Nest's face was troubled. She withdrew her husband from a group of men who had involuntarily drifted towards the fire-place, where they were trying not to look uncomfortable at the gilded mockeries of flames which filled its grate.

"What is to be done, Ben?" she whispered. "The Erles have sent an excuse. Lady Dionysia is ill, or something stupid of that sort, and they have sent Derrick—Major Erle—with their apologies."

"Well!" said Ben densely.

"Don't you see how awkward it is? It may be uncomfortable for Nella Rolfe, and it certainly will make an odd number at dinner."

Her murmurs were silenced by Derrick's entrance. He came up to her and greeted her with such cordiality that she gave a mollified glance at his handsome face.

"Did you know you would meet Mr. Vere and his daughter here?" she asked curiously. She could not see his face—as she spoke, he moved back into the shadow of the window-curtains.

"Is it love, or hate, or sheer indifference?" mused Nest. "If he loves her still he will do his best to torment her by flirting with Lady Comet. And if she cares for him she will pretend not to see it, but be frigidly polite to him."

"You have got some natives coming here to-night, haven't you?" drawled Captain Hylas.

"The most unsophisticated creatures, Hylas," mocked Major Erle in his nook, for the two young officers were on terms of intimate dislike. "They will take your small talk for wit."

"And Miss Carnegie's glass beads for diamonds," whispered Miss Seton, who rarely missed hitting an enemy, and was never known to spare a friend.

"But who are these Veres?" persisted Captain Hylas. "I have never heard of them."

"That is because you only know history as far back as the date of your own name," Derrick said insolently.

"The Veres are an old family."

"We don't go in for knowing history in the Tepids."

"And history won't go in for knowing you; so it's as bad as it is long," his tormentor said.

Mr. Icon struck in with, "Is the lady pretty?"

This time a chorus of feminine voices answered, "Oh dear no!"

Then followed those qualifying remarks by which women seek to preserve their characters for amiability while they decry a rival.

"Not bad eyes,—but very *gauche*," snapped Miss Seton.

"I did not think anything of her eyes. Her figure was good; but no style," declared Miss Carnegie.

"So dowdyish—no accomplishments," they chimed together.

Then Nest added the finishing touch of an artist:—

"A nice little thing enough; but *what* poor Walter saw in her to induce him to marry her!"

A slight shrug perfected Mrs. Alymer's meaning just as a servant announced—

"Mrs. Rolfe and Mr. Vere."

Every one was looking at them, although every one was too well bred—or shall I say too well varnished?—to show the true vein of their thoughts.

Mr. Gysart, who was a perfect analyst of social atmospheres, noted the effect of Nella's entrance, and cried softly, "A hit, by Jove!"

Unaccomplished she might be, but that was the only imputation her entrance did not dispel. With a pang in their hearts the women owned to themselves that the queenly creature on the threshold gave the lie to their prologue of depreciation. Her pure-hued dress surpassed theirs for freshness and taste as completely as her young beauty outshone their charms, which, like old shop-ware, bore the unmistakable air of having been on view for a long period.

"You said she was dowdy," grumbled Lady Comet to Miss Seton. "I believe Worth himself composed that toilette; and did you ever see such pearls?"

Meanwhile her old acquaintances were prepared to welcome Nella with every appearance of cordiality. It would have been impolite to stare down their hostess's kinswoman, wealthy Mrs. Rolfe. It was impossible for them to stare down a young woman whose noble throat

and bust were decked with jewels more precious than all their own put together. So it was "Dear Mrs. Rolfe, so charmed to renew our acquaintance; don't you remember me?" Nella bowed slightly to Miss Seton, who had only attempted to ride over her; but she utterly ignored Miss Carnegie, who had once flirted with Derrick. Her eyes put off their coldness for Mr. Alymer.

"It is a great pleasure to see you quite well again," she said.

"My dear," whispered Mr. Alymer, "Major Erle is here; now pray don't let it spoil your dinner."

For an instant to draw a breath seemed impossible, and yet she felt stifled; her face quivered like a stream troubled by its under-current. Then she met Miss Seton's peering black eyes, and became impassive.

Nest cast a rapid glance at her guests. "No help for it," she muttered with annoyance; and Major Erle was presently summoned to take Mrs. Rolfe down to dinner. Derrick came out of the shadow and offered his arm with grave politeness to Nella, saying something about the pleasure of renewing his old acquaintance with Mrs. Rolfe—"his old acquaintance!"

The proud-eyed woman, whose jewelled wrist clasped his arm slightly, asked herself which was the dream—then or now? Had his hand ever touched hers more tenderly? Had that cold face ever been pale and tear-wet for love of her? Memory had never reproduced him with this set manner and formal tone. As boy and girl they were ignorant of these grand airs. As lovers they had loved too well to quarrel, excepting fiercely and unconventionally. When they had last parted he had had a lover's plea in his eyes; for two slow years she had dreamt of, and been consoled by, that unspoken entreaty. What was he now, then? A common acquaintance!—some one to whom she must bow and smile at parting as at meeting—a hard task, when your whole existence seems to be going away with the absentee. The man who had been mixing with the world, and was an adept at all the social trickeries which so often do duty for morality, understood and accepted his outward estrangement from Walter Rolfe's wife. The woman, firm in her heart to

resist evil, had not realized this aspect of their separation. A sensitive nature shrinks like the mimosa out of all proportion to the wound received. Derrick's composure made her frigid. Mrs. Alymer, looking at the handsome pair, noted their averted eyes and cold tones, and shook her head.

"Their manner was perfect. A man should always look at his neighbour's wife like that," simple Ben said afterwards.

"As I have sown my wild oats, I don't mind telling you," quoth world-learned Nest, "that when a man *does* look at his neighbour's wife like that, he is generally thinking of her more than is good for that neighbour."

Meanwhile, book-learned Nella was thinking, "I am nothing to him; then she swiftly argued the matter out with herself, "It is best, and will make it easier for me to fight the past. I will be as indifferent as himself. He must not guess how his hold on me has eaten into my life."

To show her indifference, she gave especial attention to her other neighbour at dinner, Sir Ainsley Comet, who, after a scared glance or two at his wife, took heart to enjoy the rare attention of a young and beautiful woman. Since his marriage he had known nothing like it, the fair fishers of men being given to fling away their pretty nets when the spoil is safely landed.

When the ladies withdrew to the drawing-room, Nella was made the centre of a flounced throng. Miss Seton selected the most comfortable arm-chair for her use; Miss Carnegie begged for a nearer inspection of that "heavenly black pearl;" Lady Comet asked if she did not find it "slow" at Vere, and offered her the use of her box for the next Ascot Cup day.

"Or if you want to see real racing, you had better go in for the early Spring meetings at Newmarket. I could put you on to a good thing or two," she added confidentially.

Nella, who bore the stranger no grudge, answered mildly that "she knew nothing about racing."

"She will let you in if you don't take care," warned Miss Seton, in an undertone. "She has dropped a lot of money herself."

Nella learned from this disjointed chat of her companions that Lady Comet spoke of eminent jockeys more reverently than of church dignitaries; that she kept a "book," and was confident of making her fortune by the prowess of a certain promising two-year-old.

Nella looked at her with wonder, but expressed none. Her former experience at the Limes had taught her that to express surprise at folly or vice was worse than being vicious or foolish; it was ill-bred.

"I thought efforts were being made to stop gambling on the turf," she said.

"Oh, yes, among the lower classes," Lady Comet said hastily; "that is quite right and proper. Of course that does not apply to us."

"How wise of the Legislature not to insist on our morality," mocked Nest. "They temper their exactions to the capabilities of each class. Mrs. Rolfe, my dear, will you give us some music?"

A chorus of eager solicitations seconded her appeal.

"Shall I sing you my one song now?" Nella asked demurely of her kinswoman; "if only to reward you for not having demanded it the last time I dined here?"

"Anything you sing is sure to give us pleasure," Nest said confusedly, and recalling to her mind an old proverb—

"The heart hurt young, is hurt for long."

Repressing the most charmingly insolent suspicion of a yawn on her red lips, Nella swept to the piano, every movement of her robe followed by admiring eyes. Any tribute her companions had refused the woman in years since was now paid twofold to her toilette.

A new and disagreeable surprise awaited them. They were quite prepared to say, "How sweet!" had she moaned out any of the little ballads popular in modern drawing-rooms. Miss Seton herself often averred in husky tones that she could not "Sing the old songs now;" and Miss Carnegie was given to wail that she was "Weary of waiting—so weary," without producing any visible effect on him for whom she wearied; but they had not imagined that the new guest had the power of revelling in the mazes of an Italian bravura. Her voice, flexible as

brilliant, darted at high notes sudden but sure as a bird's flight, rippled down the scales again with exquisite precision, and finished with a shake, mimicked by soft echoes. To hear her was to think of lonely fields and a lark's song dying in the blue silence overhead.

Her companions were dumbfounded, and could only utter a very faint "Thank you," when she had finished. Miss Carnegie said sulkily—

"I thought you did not sing, Mrs. Rolfe. For my part I prefer English songs."

"Do you?" Mrs. Rolfe said sweetly. "Then I will sing you one."

The beauty somewhat ungraciously offered her a music-book, which Nella put aside after a slight glance at its contents.

"I do not care for this sugar-candy class of music," she began. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Carnegie; I did not before see your name on the cover." The truth being that the sense of utter division from Derrick increased Nella's distaste for her old rival.

From a few rich chords of prelude, her fingers strayed into that air so pathetically lovely, to which Moore has wedded kindred words—

"By the Feal's wave benighted,  
No star in the skies,  
To thy door, by love lighted,  
I first saw those eyes."

She forgot to sing for effect, the power of the words and air led her away from herself to that indefinite self which dwells in abstractions. Presently the men of the party entered the room. Nella could not see them from where she sat, and Lord Lochfyne lifted up a hand which entreated silence from his companions. Miss Carnegie and Miss Seton tried to set up a gentle buzz of conversation, but that voice of the freshest sweetness pealing through the large saloon defied their attempt to mar it.

"Some voice whispered o'er me,  
As the threshold I crost,  
There is ruin before thee,  
If thou lov'st thou art lost."



"I have never been less dissatisfied than of late companions  
and have been so in all my previous meetings more reverently  
than I have ever before. But she says a 'book,' and  
we shall be making her friends by the prowess of a  
single volume two years old."

"I have been at her visit wonder, but expressed none.  
Her former experience at the London Ball taught her that  
it was not worth it to fight if that was worse than being  
treated as a fool. I was assured."

"I have been often being made to stop gambling on  
the table, and she said."

"I have been among the lower classes," Lady Comet said  
before. "I have been in their light and proper. Of course that  
was the only way."

"I have been of the Legislature not to insist on our  
rights, but to let them. They temper their exactions  
to the weakness of our class. Mrs. Bolla, my dear, will  
not come to such a point."

"I have been in other situations according to her appeal."

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"The heart that young is lost for long."

Expressing the most thoroughly insolent suspicion of a  
lover as her old lady Nella swept to the piano, every  
movement of her body followed by admiring eyes. Any  
other her surroundings that refused the woman in years  
and was now and twofold to her toilette.

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Some voice whispered o'er me,  
As the threshold I crost,  
There is ruin before thee,  
If thou lov'st thou art lost.

"Love came and brought sorrow  
Too soon is his train,  
Yet so sweet that to-morrow  
'Twere welcome again ;  
Though misery's full measure  
My portion should be,  
I would drink it with pleasure  
If poured out by thee."

The earnest passion of her tone was still thrilling her listeners, when her eyes suddenly met those of Derrick Erle, and she paused—

"I am tired," she said, in answer to Lord Lochfyne's entreaty that she would finish the song. "I have sung enough."

"Quite enough, if you meant what you sung. Enough to make me happy," murmured a well-known voice in her ear.

Presently, under cover of some lively old English dance tunes, which she played at Mr. Alymer's request, the voice spoke again—

"I am so tired of being unhappy, Nella."

She was silent.

"Do you think there is such a one—above all, such a woman—a woman who would not let his faults part her from a man—who would rather take him with 'misery's full measure' than happiness with any other?"

She was still silent, answering him neither by word nor glance. He went on bitterly—

"Of course not! You love a man for what you fancy him to be; you create a spotless ideal; you make no allowance for a life and physique essentially different to your own. He must love you devotedly, this feminine transfiguration of the real mortal. He must dote on you as only a mortal man can; but in all other relations of life he must be colourless as an angel. When he fails, how selfish you are in your anger. How unforgiving. Nella, have you forgiven me?"

"You know it!" she muttered huskily. "Why ask me when you know it?"

The music ceased.

He said aloud, "You must have studied music much during the last few years, Mrs. Rolfe."

"I have had little else to do," she said sadly. "And you—how have you passed your time?"

Derrick looked confused.

"In trying to kill it," he said lightly, "which is in fact a species of suicide."

"I had heard," said Nella in a low voice, and not looking at him, "that you were going to be married."

"One of my mother's *canards*. She always spreads such when I am going to stay at a country-house with ineligible women."

"Then it is not true?"

"No. I am not so devoted to my male friends as to marry," he said with scorn. Seeing her look of perplexity, he added hastily, "I beg your pardon, I should not have said that to you. Miss Seton would have understood me. You reckon turtle-doves amongst your friends, and are not accustomed to watch marital faithfulness as it exhibits itself in the 'best circles.'"

She was not listening to him. She was trying not to show her gladness in her face. She had always told herself that it would be well for him to marry and be at ease. Theoretically she had often given her consent to his wedding some woman whom she hoped might be good, though she could not bring herself to hope she would be beautiful. Practically she could not forbear to exult in his isolation.

They had no further talk at present. He was too wise, and she too shy, to wish to draw attention on themselves. But when they parted that night he found an opportunity of putting on her cloak, and whispering into her ear some of those last words which are so often the anchor by which lovers secure the prize of reunion.

"I ask a great favour. You will not continue to cut me as you have done. How have I deserved it? Why should we not meet as friends?"

"As friends," she said mechanically, as their hands touched, and their eyes met.

"Always charmed to see you, Erle," cried urbane Mr. Vere, as he hurried his daughter in the carriage. "Why don't you look us up sometimes?"

"Thank you, I will," Major Erle said gratefully. "I will call before I leave the Limes."

But before he left the Limes he received a note from Nella, saying that she was ill. Not seriously, but sufficiently so to induce her to seek change of air. She and her father would have left Vere by the time Derrick received her note.

With an ugly oath, Derrick cried, "I will follow her."

If he had loved her with a tenderer and more chivalrous passion in the old days, his feeling for her now grew to the intensity of a mania. He had spent the interval of their separation in trying to persuade himself that he could love other women as well as he had once loved this one. He had grown to believe that these were at least more worthy of passion than the untrained country recluse who had bewitched his boyhood. He came back to find her the centre of admiration—more lovely and more cultured than any of those about her. There was a deeper fire in her eyes than of old. Her arms were rounder. How he had longed to kiss the one which had rested on his arm on that night when his manner had extorted Ben Alymer's admiration.

To call out the love in her eyes which might yet be there for him, he would gladly have sacrificed every meaner pleasure he had known since they parted. Thinking in this wise and stung by her avoidance, he could not rest at the Limes. He was possessed by a fever of irritation. Everything and every one jarred upon him. He only became genial again on the last day of his visit.

"Where are you going?" Nest asked, piqued by his evident relief at getting away. The little lady retained just so much hankering towards flirtation as the cat-princess may have had for a noise behind the wainscot.

"To London," Derrick said briefly, and to London he went. He said nothing of his intention of going on to Broadstairs, at which place he had ascertained Mrs. Rolfe was staying.





## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### MR. VERE'S DUTY TO HIMSELF.

**C**HANGE of scene" is not so good a receipt for a troubled spirit as doctors are apt to imagine. Grow huffed with your sweetheart, fond lover, and take yourself off to the Continent by way of reprisal. See how the provoking minx's face obtrudes itself at every turn of the way. You awake with a jump at the station, to hear the pet name by which she calls you mysteriously blended with the railway guard's demand for your ticket. You look at fine views with a heavy heart, and novelty itself is dull. In your old familiar haunts in town you had many interests, which prevented your being utterly absorbed by her image. Now she has her revenge. You are away from your club and your newspaper—from your chums and your amusements. Now those mild distractions are lost, she usurps their place, and is in everything—everywhere. You may succeed in running away from your tradesmen; you may show your heels to a herd of bullocks, or an enemy in battle; but the woman of whom you are not yet weary, who still possesses the charm of a future for you, to fly from her is but to show impatience with a tangled skein. The more haste the stronger grow the toils.

With women the remedy of "change" is even a greater failure. Their lives are made up of minutiae; everything is trifling about them, excepting their capability of suffering pain, and fresh scenes can bring them no excitement strong enough to stifle it. Transplantation more often robs their day of variety than adds to it.

In a little white house remote from the town, which, in the dusk, or at a distance, looked as if it were a rec's egg dropped in a high ledge of the cliff, Nella had taken up her abode. She had sought change for her mental health's sake. She was in the midst of unfamiliar scenes, and with no interests to occupy her. At home she was worried by Dora and the old servants, and subject to the importunities of the poor and of her pet animals. Here she could only watch the changes in the sea's face, or drive through harvest fields haunted by its undertone.

Try and forget your heart's desire, as you lounge on a warm shore side, with your face smitten by spray and sea-weed. Before you is a big thought, but love permeates it. The waves carry your soul to their dimmest, furthest edge, until in the mystery of distance you greet your lover once more. The waves roll back to your feet hints of that dear otherwhere. Hope is in their salt taste; the heart stirs freshly at the sound of their leap.

"I go to seek," ebbs out with the tide.

"I live to win," comes back with it.

Trying not to think of Derrick, to forget the farewell clasp which yet seemed to be about her hand, and to nail down her thoughts to the dead level of her existence, Nella spent two or three lonely, brooding days in the house on the cliff. Everything was brooding even to stupor. The ships were becalmed, the waves merely winked, the grass was motionless. To write a prosy letter to Dora, and to wonder why Mr. Vere had not returned to see her, as he had promised to do, constituted her sole amusement. Her landlady, a kindly old woman, whose cheeks had been bitten by the sea-winds' teeth to a constant red, suggested that a walk in the town might divert the young lady.

But Nella did not care to face strangers. The world's most ancient friend and enemy was opposite to her, and its voice, whether in wrath or play, was an ever novel mystery. One day she was surprised by the unexpected appearance of her father. He came without notice, was unusually kind and attentive to her the whole evening, and at its close asked her if he might draw on her for a little money. She begged him to accept as much as he

required, and out of deference to her wishes he consented to double the amount of the sum he proposed to borrow. He then dismissed her to bed somewhat hastily, in favour of his cigar and glass of brandy and water. The next morning he went up to town by an express train, saying that he would return and fetch her home in a few days' time, unless anything unforeseen occurred to detain him.

On the morning she expected him to arrive Nella gave a sigh of relief, as she took what she believed was a farewell gaze of the sea. She was weary of the pulseless glaring hours. "I am sick of your great blue faces," she said, apostrophising earth and ocean. "To hear the ruffle of leaves and the song of birds in the shadows will be pleasant. By to-morrow night you shall be nothing worse than a bad dream to me."

She went back to the house with a brighter face than she had worn since she had made the sacrifice which was so palling on her. The landlady met her on the threshold with a letter. Small excitements were so rare in this quiet spot, that the arrival of a letter for any member of the community was considered a legitimate subject for all to take an interest in.

"Then he is not coming," Nella said half aloud, in her disappointment, as she recognised her father's handwriting. She sat down to read her letter with a resentful feeling towards the clock which ticked on the wall, the blue-bottle buzzing at the pane, and the delf shepherdess attitudinising at a companion shepherd on the mantel-piece. She must hear and see them for at least another day, she feared.

"MY DEAR NELLA," her father wrote, "after all I have gone through for my children, I hope they will not grudge me a little rest and happiness in my old age; but I shall not be surprised at their resenting the step I am about to take, for all young people are selfish, and think that parents are only meant to serve as their stepping-stones to fortune. That they should love their children, appears to the latter to be only right and proper. That they should love any one else, monstrous and indecent. I feel it to be a duty I owe to myself not to let any parental



weakness persuade me into sacrificing my remaining years of life to the egotism of my family. In my latter days I am a cipher amongst you. Dora thinks infinitely more of Mr. Chaunter's comforts than she ever did of mine. Frequently, indeed, I have observed that she has wished me to spoil my own dinner by waiting for him when he has been late—a convincing proof that the instincts of Regan and Goneril are not obsolete. Max and Gilbert have been a heavy call on my purse ever since they were born, and now, on the rare occasions they honour me with their presence, they continue to read my *Times* before I do, to usurp my easy chair, and only resign it with a laboured apology (which bores me more than a cane-bottomed seat would). They dictate to me on every imaginable subject, more especially on the degree of expenditure they consider me bound to lavish on them. I love my sons, of course, and no doubt they love me, but they will bear my death without any rebellious murmurs at the will of Providence; and I do not regard their absence in the light of an irrevocable misfortune.

“I have no wish to reproach you, Nella. Had matters turned out differently, and you had been able, with your poor husband, to take your proper place in the world, I do not doubt but that I should have found your town house as comfortable a resort as a tender father, fond of society, could have desired. I had hoped to have revelled in my daughter's home in the best wine, the best cooking, the best billiard-table, and the best stud in England. All these hopes are dashed—and—I mean no unkindness—but you must confess that you have not been a cheerful companion to me for these last four years. Also, with the best intentions, you are not able to touch sufficient of your fortune to keep me in funds. I have not been fortunate of late. With a perseverance worthy of a better cause every horse loses which I back. I have determined to put my money on something a trifle less insecure—*i.e.*, a woman—in other words I am going to be married. The lady is wealthy, and a widow. As we have both of us already known the trials and disappointments of wedded life, it is to be expected that we shall be blessed in our union, as those who expecting nothing are not disap-

pointed. We do not propose to go to Vere for some time, as Mrs. Minching has a horror of the country, which she regards as being unwholesome and melancholy. We shall be married quietly, and shall spend the winter abroad. Your cheque was of the greatest service, as without it I could not have provided the special license, which is to make me one with the woman I adore.

"Your affectionate father,

"GILBERT VERE.

"P.S.—She has £8000 a-year, and we are going to buy a son of Beadsman, who is entered for the next Derby. Dora and her husband are coming down to you for change of air, and you can return to Vere with them, as my time is necessarily much occupied."

Angry incredulity was Nella's first feeling. Her father must be mad to play such a senseless joke upon her. Then she re-read the letter, and rapidly coupled its information with various items of intelligence Dora had supplied her with from time to time concerning her father's intimacy at a comfortable little house in Bruton Street, occupied by the widow of a man who had made his money on the turf—a man whom death alone could make respectable. Her face grew white with agitation.

"Then it is true!" she cried aghast. "Oh, mother—mother!"

The landlady, perceiving that Nella was no longer engaged in the perusal of her letter, stepped briskly forward—

"Then you will want some dinner to-night, mum?"

"No! he was not coming to-night," Nella said gloomily. "She did not care what she had for dinner."

She took up her hat and shawl, and walked down to the shore with desperate haste, though seeking no especial goal. She was shaken with grief and mortification. "What is there for me now?" she thought. "Even Vere is gone from me." The dear old home which had known her blithest and bitterest days. How could she endure to see a stranger there—a woman whose very presence would be a desecration of the past, and an irritation in the present.

"All is gone! all is gone!" she repeated sadly.

Staring moodily seaward, with eyes dimmed by tears, her thoughts a mist in which sorrow loomed darkly, she did not observe that any one was near her. The echoless sands gave no notice of footsteps, and it was not until a shadow suddenly darkened the sheen of the spot where she stood that she turned round, and found herself face to face with Derrick Erle.

"I hope I have not startled you," he said rapidly—"that you are not angry with me for coming here. It was by the merest chance"—(Oh, Derrick!)—"I found out you were here. I am staying at the town for change of air. I am ill." (This was not strictly true, but he looked haggard and pale enough to bear out his assertion.)

He paused here. He knew enough of women and of their generosity in trifles to be able to calculate the effect of his last words.

A quick look of concern was flashed up at him from the brown eyes which had hitherto been cast down.

"I shall not stay here long; not long enough to strain your patience," he continued. "My yacht is coming round to fetch me away in a few days. Meanwhile, will you be kind, and let me walk in this direction sometimes? I am so dull in the town yonder, not knowing a soul. You promised you would not cut me. You said we might meet as friends."

She hesitated.

"At all events, let me come to-morrow, and have a chat about old times. I declare," he added, looking down with an amused expression at the respective lengths of their shadows on the sands, "I do believe you are grown."

His sudden gaiety was infectious, and was better calculated to dispel her fears than the too earnest manner of his first greeting.

"You don't object" (catching up a handful of pebbles) "to my playing ducks and drakes in your company?" Glancing round, he saw a smile lurking in her lip's curl. "Then you are *not* angry with me, and I may stay here for the present?"

"For the present," she echoed softly, casting a pebble after his, which fell ignominiously short of its destination.

"Miss Seton may say what she likes ; women may get the suffrage, and all that, but they will *never* be able to throw stones," quoth Derrick pityingly.

His manner was unconscious, his tone light, his eyes gay and unremembering.

"There cannot be much harm in seeing him now," she said, half sighing to herself, when they had parted that afternoon. She despatched two telegraphic messages. One was to Dora, begging her and Mr. Chaunter to come at once and take her away ; the other to Walter Rolfe's medical attendant, asking him to let her know if she could be of any service to her husband—if there was any chance of his tolerating her presence if she went to him.

Early the next morning she received answers to both her messages.

Dora's ran thus : "Yes, as soon as baby has cut his tooth."

The doctor's was even more concise : "Not to be thought of."

"No one seems to want me!" thought Nella ruefully. Then, looking through the sickly scarlet geraniums that barred out the blue sea square at the window, she saw a solitary figure lounging on a distant shelf of sand. "He is expecting me. I must go and see him just once more," she said.

Now, for the first time since she had been there, she looked at herself in the mirror, which gesture of vanity revealed to her a face which might have served as a model for the "nut-brown maid" in all excepting the skin, which was most bloomingly fair.





## CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHAT FRIENDSHIP ENDED IN.

"Will ye e'er pardon the high fault  
Which love has garred me do?"

"**N**ELLA, I am going away to-morrow."  
For some days past he had played at friendship and decorum with the woman he loved with a sufficiently good grace. For some days past she had played with danger, growing each hour more blind to its presence.

To-day they were sitting side by side on a warm slope of shingle. To spectators they seemed mere summer-day idlers, with lazy eyes, half-closed in face of the great glare of sun and sea; and listless fingers plucking at the pebbles.

"Going!" she echoed, and her hands became still. There was silence, and she thought the waves seemed hushed and the sun veiled. Our briefest word sometimes tells our longest history. She said nothing more; but she seemed to hear that word sighed over and over again in the waves' refrain.

"Once before I came to bid you good-bye," he said musingly. "Do you remember it?"

Her hand dropped its toys of weed and stone, and crept near his palm.

"Don't touch me," he said quickly; "I can't bear it. You don't understand," he went on, vexed at the rebuffed look in her eyes. "Men are not like pet dogs, to be soothed with a benevolent pat which means nothing. Your

touch fevers me. But I see you *do* remember; and do you remember what that hour felt like?"

"It was all very fresh, very damp, very young," Nella said. "It rained and blew; we cried and loved each other, defiant of rheumatism. We felt helpless, like stupid flies caught by an unexpected agony. We called the foe circumstance; but it was your mother who meshed us, keeping demurely in the background till the disagreeable buzzing was over. We were two children; we believed not only in each other, but in ourselves. I cried myself to sleep for several nights afterwards; while you smoked an inordinate number of cigars all the early part of the voyage out, felt ill and dull, and called the sensation 'Nella.'"

"I sicken far more of my life now," Derrick said moodily. "I keep away from you, and I stagnate; I come to you, and am irritated to agony. To waste one's eyes in unsatisfied longing for the woman one loves, to starve all the days and be haunted by the memory of one's famine all the nights—that's my complaint, and I call it 'Nella.' Oh, child! fancy the damnation of a life of half-glances of that one most covets!"

"Why do you covet me?" she said sadly. "I am not worthy it, and the world is thick with prizes. Go and seek another."

"Doubtless, when I'm older, I shan't covet you or any other luxury to a painful degree. Our sex waste their passions in use. I see men of forty who have tasted every specimen of life's pleasures to the extinction of their palates; then they fall in love with themselves, and call it 'philosophy.' A man who would not walk all through a winter night to get a touch of a woman's fingers has outlived himself. Nella, why did you make me come here?"

"I don't ask you," she faltered. "I call you sometimes in my sleep, I think; for I wake up with my lips forming your name. But in the day, I know, you had best keep away. When two people have been to each other what we have been, they should meet for ever or not at all."

"You did not ask me to come," he echoed, with a bre

in his voice ; " but oh, Nella, I'm *hunted* here, I'm driven by my own heart, by my memory, by all my faculties. I tried to settle away from you ; I tried to forget you, and learn the brutalising creed that one woman's worth is as another's. Whoso believes that, has forgotten his first love—she who made every woman's face seem pure. I meet plenty of caricatures of your sex, with prettier faces than yours, Nella, and I like them well enough until they laugh. There is a laugh of the gaslights, and a laugh which has a ruffle of the wood-stream in it. It was the memory of your voice that sickened me of one I heard the day before I came here ; I was drawn down here by that memory, and now——?"

" It's the old story," she said sadly ; " for honour's sake—for both our sakes—you must go back."

" Is life long enough for honour when honour spoils life ? Is that phantom to snatch food from our lips and sleep from our lids, and suck joy from our hearts ?"

" We should wear our lives heavily without it, I fancy," she said mournfully. " Where are you going, and when, Derrick ?"

" I am going to South America. When a man, with no profession, not too largely gifted with intellectual faculties, gets heartsore, he either drinks himself silly, or takes to sport in a violent, mediumless fashion. If it were the hunting-season, I daresay I should comfort myself with nasty fences. The field would call it ' going straight ;' I should call it ' Nella.' " He added, under his breath—" I *hate* you sometimes for making me love you to such a degree of pain."

He looked at her with an angry glow in his eyes, as she rose and held out her hand.

" Why are you going ?" he demanded.

" Talking won't help it," she said sadly ; " and the sweetness of every moment I pass with you now will turn bitter to-night, when you are gone, and I lie awake with nothing but a grey line of sea and a window-frame of bleak stars to stare at."

" Nella " (plucking at her sleeve to detain her), " I can't talk to you here ; to have to bow and smirk at the passers-by—to give out pretty flowers of speech and looks

when one feels uprooted—it is too hard. Let us have a row—the sea is like glass. The future will be starved enough; don't grudge me a few rich moments now. Heaven knows, I shall want a few pleasant memories in my new life."

She doubted; he flung away her hand petulantly. "These women outdo Shylock," he sneered; "they take a man's life-blood, and give blanks in exchange."

"I will come," she cried; "but, Derrick, is it right?"

"No, I do not think it is right," he answered still ruffled. "It is right that you should walk up and down that promenade in the town yonder on Sunday afternoon, and stare at the passers-by in an irreproachable bonnet. It is right that you should attend morning service, and pray for all miserable sinners, especially such as are women prettier and better dressed than yourself. It is right that you and the man who loves you should sit through life cold and separate as the stone figures that kneel each side of a tombstone; and it is *not* right that you should give a poor devil a grain of comfort that may ease his torture—a sweet savour his lips may remember in their long drought hereafter. It is right that you should on this day of grace walk with a Sunday step and a Sunday face among the crowd, where the church bells clang, amidst the hum of scandal and rustle of silks; but it isn't right that you and I should bask in that sunline yonder, and speak our last words with the peace of solitude about us. Be it so; you have added another 'nay' to the list of your repentances. Now I bow and bid you good-bye, as any other acquaintance might do."

"'Yea' more commonly heads the woman's list, I fancy," she muttered; but looking at his face, and remembering that after this day she might see it no more, she asked herself whether to-morrow would not be intolerably sore, without the additional ache of his parting frown.

"Do not be so bitter," she said meekly. "I am coming with you, Derrick; but it is, it *must* be, for the last time."

His face brightened, and they walked down to the boat which he had engaged for his daily use—she silent, not daring to think; he silent, but full of thought.



"The last time!" he said inwardly; "to how many dramas have those words been the prologue?"

"Rest a little," she said presently, her little fingers skimming an instant over his strong bared arms, and the arms relaxed and obeyed the spell of her touch.

"Don't you like it?" he asked. No shadow on his face now; it was a-glow with sunshine and fresh sea-breaths. It was an hour for dreamy questions and irrelevant answers. They were as two butterflies poised on the windy blossoms of the waves, with no thought but to tremble and bask.

"I don't see you, Derrick," she said dreamily; "I have half closed my lids, and only let in two long blue ridges of sea and sky. The glimmer of cliff and town comes between them. Shall I tell you of a subtle delight? It is to be young and day-dream, with a hand clasped in a palm that one loves." When you have nearly forgotten his presence, you suddenly meet his eyes with all the joy of a fresh greeting.

"But I see you, Nella," he said earnestly; "and to me you are always vivid, and out-burn everything else. I don't care a rush for sun, land, or sea, excepting that I should like the last to be a little rougher, that the strife in me might find a safety-valve in exercise. Nella, look at me while I speak; for I'm going to plead my cause with you for 'the last time.' You used those words just now with cowardly satisfaction, not thinking of the cruelty of them, only of your own self-exculpation."

He leant forward, and clasped her hands, looking all his heart into her eyes as he spoke.

"Presently, if you wish it, I will row you back again; then we shall part—you to go back to Vere, to a dreary, empty house, emptied even of such duties as sometimes suffice mollusc-hearted women for pleasures. No one has a claim on you, and no one will claim either your love or your sympathy. You have chosen to live in seclusion, too proud to wear your grief on your sleeve. If you were to tire of your numb life, and gave any other man a chance of loving you, he would have less right to you than I, and I should come back to you to contest that right. I think it would kill me, even to think of any other having your love."

She shook her head. "No fear of that. I am tired. I am not young enough to delight in emotion for emotion's sake. And when you are gone ——" She broke off, then resumed with sudden passion, "I can do nothing but pray and remember."

She bowed her head over her arms, and hid her face from him.

"Nella," he urged, "think what you are doing, love; wrecking two lives for a vision. Think of our loneliness, our uselessness in life. It is very fine to laugh at love-sickness, but who can help the heart-canker spreading to all our aims. I am an unhappy man without you, but with you I should be so happy, that I think you could not fail to catch the infection. Trust yourself to me, and let us give ourselves a chance of re-capturing some of our old lost joys. I love you so, surely I could comfort you for anything my love lost you."

"What do you wish me to do?" she cried in a shaken voice. "Speak plainly, Derrick?"

"I want you to go away with me. I want that we should live all the rest of our lives for and with each other. I want you, Nella, for my very own; no longer to dream of you as a torture, or Will-o'-the-Wisp, perpetually vexing and wearying me, but as a real solid happiness. You talked just now of the pleasure of waking from day-dreams to meet the light of eyes one loves. Think what I should feel at hearing your voice, moving through my home, mixing with the birds on summer mornings? Come to me, Nella, the dearest things life holds for me. But no, I don't want you with that look on your face. I would never care to rank amongst a woman's duties. You shan't say 'yes' for pity's sake; only because you love me so, you feel that our happiness will be at too great a height for regret to soil."

There was silence, save for the slow drip from the rested oar.

To the west she saw a speck on the glimmering blue; it was his yacht—that which would take him away when she had said "no."

"Oh," she thought, "to say 'no,' and think of it to-morrow—that is hard!" In how many vigils would not

memory flash this scene before her! How she would be tortured by the ungranted plea in his eyes, by his passion-wrought face, darkly clear against two worlds of blue—how she would then yearn for the impossible touch of those strong hands now linked in entreaty—entreaty to her who would die to give him great happiness, if only she might save the traditions of her girlhood!

"Give me strength! Give me strength!" she cried vaguely.

It is well for those who have regulated the general tenour of their lives by pure, even laws. Under the spell of some inexorable temptation they may deviate for a while from their own rule, but in the pause between temptation and failure they know where to grasp for aid. The chambers of their mind are neat and orderly: in such a crevice is the claw of the devil, in such a casement is the light of heaven; they know where to grope. This poor troubled woman was ill-trained. She lost her nerve now as she faced her peril. She clutched at vague rafts of conscience—"A woman without honour was vile as a man without courage;" and then again had she not once heard Max apply to the Veres the old glorious eulogy—"The men all *sans peur*, the women *sans reproche*." Such household words as these—shreds of old sayings, chance grains that have fallen from wise men's lips and have flowered for all time—who can say what may be their value? This only nearly saved Nella.

"Derrick, I cannot," she said desperately, but she could not look at him.

"Hush! don't speak again until I can see your face. I'd trust a woman's eye before her tongue any day. Now, love, while I hold you, you shall decide all."

He dragged himself to her feet, and clasped his arms about her waist.

"You don't mind my arm, do you?—it comforts me to hold you. You need not look landward, no one can see you excepting through a strong glass, and even then your wraps are taking care of your reputation. Nella, yonder is my yacht. Say but 'yes,' and we'll go home to her at once. We need never return to that house -t all. Bother your landlady and maid, and what 'they

think.' You can write to Dora, and I will send on shore for anything you want. Say 'yes,' Nella—yes, yes. Oh, be quick to say it!"

She plucked at her hands nervously, tried to speak, took in a breath of sea-air sharp with spray, formed 'no' with her lips, looked at him, and was silent.

"Do you realize all we are losing?" he urged. "Do you know that love, mutual and intense, is the one glimpse of his old-world heaven a human being may hope to gain in this life,—and so few achieve it. I have seen dozens of married people less mated than ourselves—pairs who have a common name and a common life, and who lack to each other the perfect sense of oneness which is the rarefaction of passion. These so-called unions—what are they? Convenient alliances; barter by which a woman gains one thing and the man another. He takes her to his arms and his life, haunted by other arms and sweeter life. She, too, who acquiesces in a tame, barn-fowl sort of content, may have dreams which revive the blushes of a dearer love-time. Such as these live but half-lives. I cannot explain all I feel, perhaps because the feeling is so subtle; it escapes words, but I know that two persons are only truly mated when they can say to each other, 'you for me, and you only.' I taste my whole existence in your lips. I give back heart-beat for heart-beat. You are mine to the core. All was nothing till you came. Now there is a world, and it is full. Our eyes say 'mine own' before we speak: we are one desire, one present, one future. Nella, are we not thus to each other? Can you look at me and swear you don't love me as I love you—at love's greatest height?"

No; she could not say it while her eyes rested on him. Their tenderness would have given her the lie. So she looked at the horizon and the far sails mounting up the blue hill, and was still silent.

"I knew it," he said exultingly. He took her face in his hands and held it up to him.

"Now speak."

In her heart she said—"I love every turn in your face. Especially its blemishes are lovable. The dent in your forehead—I should like to tap it with my finger. The

curls that are close about your ears—if I were shameless I would touch them with my lips when I passed them. The scorch of sun tan that ripples under them until checked by the white marble throat. Then your deep-coloured eyes, with the large pupil spots and black fringes. Those are grandest of all, for you will live there; and it is sweet to watch the shades of your will. And your hands brown and deep-veined—how can I resist their trembling?"

But still she held her peace, while her better instinct warred against their self-abasement.

"Speak," he said again, and this time his voice had died into a whisper.

Presently he dropped his face in her palms, and she felt them scorched by hot tears.

"You are racking me!" he muttered.

A man's tears, difficult to shed and bitter in proportion, are always painful to behold, and especially terrible to the woman who loves him. His strength is his attraction, his reticence is his power; to see him showing a child's weakness, his eyes wet with pain of her causing, his whole soul prostrate with failure, made her forget self. The sun that makes the whiteness of an unstained life is invisible while you enjoy it; not until you grope in darkness do you realize the value of the vanished light.

Honour, self-respect, fearless eyes—the graceful daring of a woman whose past is unquestioned, whose present is unequivocal—all these were forgotten, purposely forgotten maybe, by Nella, as she felt her hands touched by her lover's last plea. She looked at him through a mist of her own tears.

"Love! this is the second time your eyes have been wet for me, and who else would weep for me? Never again, dear. I give up all—everything. We will go away together, Derrick!"

Her face flushed and drooped; his looked up radiant, seeking her lips.

"Shall we never repent it?" she murmured.

He had no words with which to answer her. Pain had made him eloquent, but the great joy of her 'yea' held him dumb.



## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### THE WORLD WELL LOST.

**M**ALCYON days followed. The pair ceased to remember—it was sufficient to be. For a time they were greatly happy. Their first waking thought was, "We are together;" the last ere sleeping, "To-morrow we are still together." They stifled memory and prescience with the fulness of their love. They travelled much and rapidly. The new scenes she moved in were wonderful to Nella, but she hardly felt their wonder. She scarcely noted how strange it was to glide down a street that reflected a city—a city of mysteries, where birds did not shrill nor leaves rustle, where the church bells were sullen for lack of an echo, and where at night the restless gleams of passing gondolas made sudden revelations of sombrous palaces. She turned her eyes from these to her lover's face. "You are there," she said softly.

And there was no "but" for Derrick as yet. She was his; and she was fair to look on. Her face gladdened for him; for him her voice changed; he felt all the prideful delight of a child in a long-coveted toy—of a man whose vanity and whose taste are satisfied to a degree of ecstasy. He liked to feel Nella detain his arm as she paused before a picture. His eyes did not, like hers, grow big with reverence for the Titians, but he prized her more for her delight in what Murray told him was praiseworthy; he would not have cared to show these rare sights to a woman who looked at them with the expression of a bland fish,

and who felt considerably less interested in them than in the last number of *Le Follet*.

It was good taste to admire these things, and so he let Nella linger in the galleries all the afternoons; then when the sunset flushed the inlaid floors and precious walls, when the velvet glowed redder on the senator's robe, and the hair of the beauty revealed all its treasure of spun gold, Nella left the old yesterdays for the trance of to-day, and went out to glide with her lover through rose lights to the tune of persuaded waves.

"Don't you think Venice is just a little slow?" suggested Derrick, by-and by; "it reminds me of a magnificent mausoleum. I'm tired of feeling as if I were in a by-gone century. We will go to Rome."

Nella sighed. "It is a good place to forget in," she said; but his wish, once known, was hers. She who has abdicated all, can no more exercise the petty tyrannies which are graceful in unconquered royalty.

One evening she woke from a troubled slumber to find herself travelling over what seemed a limitless plain. Not a sound but the rolling of their own wheels broke the melancholy of that realm of silence. One broken pillar stood gaunt against the sunset—a sentinel column keeping ward over dead cities, buried perhaps under the sea of grass. She shivered, and put out her hand to clasp Derrick's. "It is weird," she said; "it looks as if our journey were for ever."

"It is to be for ever, isn't it?" he said tenderly; and for a while his look and touch shielded her from her own thoughts. When she next looked out, the spires of an old world were gleaming faintly against the horizon.

She stared big-eyed at the grand tradition, crying, with a catch in her voice, "Rome! Oh, Derrick, it is Rome?"

Yes, Derrick said, yonder was Rome; and close behind them was a carriage full of English people. "I wonder if any one is there whom we know," he continued, peeping out of his window; but Nella shrank back. She no longer remembered Rome; for as the strangers passed them, she heard a voice she fancied she knew.

In her dreams that night she heard it again; it was bailing the dogs at intervals in the Vere woods, and

laughing at her as she ran to escape some pellets of beech-nuts. She called aloud "Max!" and awoke. It was fancy, of course. One of those echoes of elsewhere, which sometimes make the sailor's heart jump as it coaxes him for an instant from his duty of night watch.

When Nella next awoke she was in Rome; but she gave only a slight attention to scenes in which, at an earlier time of her life, she would have revelled. When the gladiator drooped rigid in the death gasp before her, her eyes were restlessly seeking her lover's. Did his heart wax large in sympathy with hers at the sight of that wondrous similitude of manhood's broken power?

No: Derrick was scanning the burnt fringe of his dying cigar.

"It's a bit slow here," he suggested. "Let us go and drive on the Pincian."

What availed it that dreams of art haunted the whole Italian air; that Madonnas, with dim gold tresses, folded prayerful hands in the ancient crypts; that perfect shapes of young gods broke the shadows of the palace corridors. Derrick did not care much for these things. He could be fervid, even poetic, in the discussion of his personal feelings when these were much stirred. He thought Nella beautiful, and to love a beautiful woman is to be in some sense a poet; but this sense was not extended to remoter objects.

"The Cenci looks as if all the centuries' autumns that have glowed since Guido's death had blushed brownly on her cheeks," Nella said, her eyes resting lovingly on the most inimitable of portraits.

"That reminds me the 'bifteck' will be done to a cinder," yawned Derrick.

So it came to pass that Nella chose to cease to care for these things. She did not dare own to herself that there was any serious dissimilarity between her and the being with whom she linked her life.

Derrick met one or two old acquaintances at Rome. He shirked these as much as possible, and declined all invitations. Unconsciously to himself, he could not help esteeming himself a little more highly for his self-denial. Nella's position was peculiar. He would not expose her



to the insolence either of detractors or admirers. He would give up all—he was giving up all, for her sake. He had frequent letters from England. His mother was ever urging his return home. His father's health was delicate. Derrick's place was at home. He should be at Erleholt, learning the social duties of ownership. He should come to England and settle down. Such was the burden of her constant appeals. But all these he had forfeited for Nella, and by Nella he would abide. True, he was restless; sighed a little when he saw of how old a date was the *Times* newspaper by the day it reached him. He grew especially restless when the hunting season began, yet he did not dare to wish to go back to England, for Nella's sake. Such a return would be dreadful for her. But oh, what thick coveys were whirring from the Erleholt preserves in October!—what rattling bursts from the Erleholt coverts in December!—for Sir George Erle was nothing if he were not popular, and his preservation of game and foxes alike ranked very high as a virtue among his neighbours. Derrick could not go to Erleholt, but he was not bound to stay at one place, and there would be no harm in his moving a little nearer to home.

“Is there anything more you wish to see in Rome?” he asked of Nella.

She had no wish on the subject she said. Every hour her interest concentrated more and more on himself. He was becoming terribly necessary to her. The day before they left Rome she drove to the Protestant cemetery to say “good-bye,” as she involuntarily phrased it. Derrick was busy with his banker, and was otherwise employed in making ready for their departure, so she was alone in her pilgrimage. It was a favourite resort of hers, and Derrick had often wondered at what he called her dismal taste. She did not tell him that it was sweeter to her to be with these incurious friends than to hurry through crowds with furtive eyes which sought to avoid the faces of her own country people. These two did not dare confess their sacrifices to each other, lest the confession should seem jarred by complaint. In the pleasant garden of yielded souls she felt rested and at ease. English names were thick on the tombstones. Under yonder deep-leaved

violets Shelley's great, tender heart rested in odorous shadow. On a marble tomb, near by, Miss Bathurst lifted her pure face heavenwards, as if entreating indemnity for her untimely death. Keats was calm under a waving sea of grass in the lower cemetery.

Nella, remembering by tradition and portraits the faces of the dead, felt that those bright souls would have shown no coarse scorn of her. "I should like to dwell with you when I die," she thought. "I should like to be buried here if I utterly became friendless." She put aside her forebodings with a smile. Would she not always have Derrick? She gave a lingering glance to the brooding cypresses and the passionate-hued flowers which flamed in the urns they overshadowed; to the little marble babe who held a carven butterfly on her finger, whilst the wind blew rose-leaves about the inscription which told of her parents' heart-break. Saying good-bye to the sleepers, Nella went out again to her unrest.

She desired that her carriage should stop at the baths of Caracalla. She knew nothing of the historic value of those ruins, but she shrank from returning home. Derrick would not be there until late, and she hated the vigil at the window from which she knew she would not be able to refrain. She rested for awhile against a broken column in one of the outer courts. The sun was hot on the dim reptile shapes that crawled on the mosaic pavement, and numberless glad-coloured weed flowers were widening the crevices and marring the strange devices in the marble. Half a column lay prone in thwarted grass, the remaining half, sullen and trenchant, was trifled with by roses which flung their pink heads against it and played on by their freakish shadows. Nella, taking in long gleams of densely blue sky through her dreaming eyes, opening her lips to the breath of the wild roses, and seeing vaguely the gaunt shadows thrown by the fragments of classic walls, thought not of what she saw, but of England. Something, she knew not what, had brought the word home to her mind, with one of those sharp touches of pain which sometimes probe us when we are off the guard we keep against ourselves.

"I want to pick the roses at Vere, to see the old mill

blacken in the sunset, to hear the dogs bark, and be scolded by Dora and Martha," she thought. "Oh, to be home again, looking over the stiles down the long fields, and seeing a future in the red sky!"

She longed for the sound of some familiar voice—something removed from the lurid atmosphere of her present sad happiness. Looking far beyond the great gaps of sun and shade, which was all that was left of Caracalla's pleasure-house, she repeated with filling eyes,—"I want my youth again. I want to go home." Did the sun scorch her eyeballs with a pain as of fire? Did the figures in the grass seem to heave convulsively, and scatter all the weed blooms into whirling confusion? Was she sick or mad? Or was her unspoken prayer mysteriously answered? From a block of rifted chambers near her came the sound of a voice which she had heard in the Campagna the night she came to Rome. Mingled with it were some girlish tones, sweet and careless as the blackbird's spring chant, which were strange to her. Nella did not heed them, but strained her ears for the deeper voice. "Once more!—just once more!" she muttered. But there were no more words said, for the speakers had turned an angle of the wall and were opposite to her. Nella saw that there were two ladies with surprised faces. Saw, too, that Max Vere's face was there, and that it was growing deadly white.

"Max!" she cried; "Max! I ——" She had run towards him with her hands out and face up. In the first glow of surprise, she claimed the old right of a loving greeting. It was a face which had been hers—hers to caress or scratch when it was plump and dimpled, and provocative alike of kisses and slaps. In youth, as infants, they had fought and adored each other; in their older days they had trusted to and confided in each other.

"Max, dear old Max," was before her after a waste of absence. Her heart went out to meet him with such a flame of welcome that she forgot herself, and what she was.

"Max, dear Max!" her hands and eyes spoke with her lips. But Max answered her in detail with his face still pallid, but otherwise giving no signs of emotion. He put

aside her hands, gave no word in answer to hers, looked coldly into and beyond her eyes, and stepping slightly between them, with a care that his girl companion should be separated from Nella, Nella's brother passed her by on the other side.

"Madame is ill," her courier said, hurrying up to her side. "Madame would like to go home." Nella said "Yes," feebly. She was, in truth, ashey-coloured as the grey stone over which she drooped. When as children they had struck each other, half in sport, half rage, the cheeks had reddened. It had been easy to forget those angry flushes. But what could ever blot from her shamed memory the pale face of avoidance she had seen to-day?

"Those were a young married couple on their marriage tour," the garrulous courier told her as he attended her to the carriage. "They are lodging near milady's hotel."

All that evening Nella was longing to wail out her trouble—to say, "Derrick, I met Max to-day, and he cut me. He looked as if he had never seen me before—I, who was his favourite sister! Oh, Max, Max, how could you!"

But she restrained herself, not choosing to blame Derrick by parading the grief of which he was the cause. It was the first practical condemnation of her error she had met with, and she felt all its keen novelty. "He was right, quite right," she moaned to herself; "how could I so forget what I am?"

The next morning she hurried their preparations for departure as much as possible, and Derrick wondered at her sudden energy.

"I don't like the place," she said. "I think it is making me ill. It is full of bad dreams. Last night I dreamt we had grown old, dear—old and unloving; and we sat in a room of shadows asking each other, 'What have we done?'"

"Old of course we may live to be, but never unloving," Derrick said with tender fervour; and Nella was comforted.

"Yes, love me always," she murmured, as their lips met in consolation. "I have no one but you now."



## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

**T**HE rain was thick on the chestnut groves of Lucca. The little villas looked dragged and out of time. In summer they hung on the hill-side like bird-cages set deep in the hill's fringe. In summer the valleys were gay with the prattle of children and gentle streams, and this was the cheeriest nook in North Italy; but now the hollows were thick with rain, the peaks laden by sulky clouds. The baths were closed, the church bell was dumb, the population could be counted on your fingers.

Derrick and Nella had been abroad nearly a year, and it was now September. The sight of the reddening leaves was drawing Derrick homewards. Most healthy young Englishmen feel very strongly the attraction of their country in the seasons of its most vigorous sports. They had been staying in Florence, and the sight of Miss Seton's name in the stranger's book had driven them out of it. Nella pleaded for delay.

"Give me a few more weeks in Italy," she said. "I dread England. You are my home now, Derrick; and I shall lose you there."

"There can be no question of loss," Derrick said cheerily; "and you know we must return at some time."

"Why must?" she asked wistfully.

"You seem to forget that I have relations and friends," he said, with some impatience. "My father and mother urge my return in every letter."

"My father would not speak to me if I were before him," Nella muttered in a low, sad tone, so low that Derrick did not hear her.

To drive from Lucca to the baths was a pleasant romance. The winding road was sketched over by still leaf-shadows. The river below said gently, "I remember." The woods thronged the heights, carrying wan gold lights far up into the blue.

It was not until the morning after their arrival that the mountains put off their summer airs, and suddenly developed their savagery. There was a down-pour for two days and nights. From the ground-floor window of the hotel they could see through rain-dimmed panes the folds of the swollen torrent, and the bridge white with its rage. Nature, as Derrick expressed it, was having a game at pitch-and-toss. Soon the rain unloosened the boulders, and added such fury to the Serchio that the mail-courier refused to ply. He should be crushed by a stone or upset over such a tree as was now stretched across the roadway, in a swathe of waters whirling over and around it, he said. And thus the mild excitement of watching for possible letters and old newspapers was denied to the solitary customers of the inn.

It was the fourth day of storm, and Derrick was sitting in a rocking-chair by some feeble brands of firewood. Nella, on a stool by his side, had a finger linked in his. She liked the dreariness without—the wreck of the day, its wild sobs and interludes of sad, patient rain.

Derrick grew pettish with her air of content.

"I really believe you don't mind this weather," he grumbled.

"I like it because you are here," she said gently.

He kissed her gratefully.

"But oh, if it would only clear up!" he cried with despair. "Do you know we may be shut up here any number of days—a whole week, perhaps—until the road is passable, in fact?"

They took to that last resource of the desperately idle—diarising.

Derrick's notes were involuntarily tinged by a long course of Bradshaw's laconics.

"Came to Lucca," he wrote. "Wish I hadn't A horrible hole!"

"Come to Lucca," said Nella. "There are no disagreeable women here to make eyes at Derrick! A charming place!"

Derrick soon flung down his pencil, and sauntered to the window.

"What," he cried, with a yawn, "what on earth are we to do with ourselves for the rest of the day? Ugh, what a dismal hole!"

Nella looked penitent. Somehow the woman is generally made to feel penitent when her mate is vexed. She tried to interest him in a comparison she was drawing between two poems.

"Derrick, which of these descriptions best gives you the idea of the tumult of a battle heard from afar?—

'So all day long the noise of battle rolled  
Among the mountains by the winter sea.'

To me these lines, though grand in their sombrousness, have the monotony of a fog. They represent an unvaried phase. The war broods rather than rages. Now listen to the lines that end 'The Fight of Lake Regillus'—

'And far away the battle  
Went roaring through the pass.'

This is splendid as a tempest. The war surges on—one can fancy its unspent fury carrying ruin and agony far beyond the limits of the mountain echoes."

"I don't know how there could have been much roaring in any case," Derrick said prosaically. "Even as late as Crecy, I believe, we only used four pieces of cannon. Talking of cannons," he added plaintively, "what wouldn't I give to hear one again! I mean, my dear" (seeing her look of wonder), "in the billiard-room at the 'Raleigh.' Hallo, what's that?"

"That" was the sound of wheels labouring over the storm-racked pathway to the hotel.

"Visitors!" cried Derrick. "Hurrah! Come and look, Nella!"

The two raced to the window, and stood laughing and

peeping like a couple of children at the new-comers. At the door was a carriage shining wet with rain, a soaked-looking driver, and a moping courier on the box. A fat lady and a thin one could be seen through the mist of the drawn-up panes of glass.

"By Jove, she's nodding to me!" Derrick cried with increased excitement. "Who can it be?"

He was not long left in doubt.

"Miss Seton's compliments to Major Erle, and could he come and speak for a few moments to her and her friend the Duchess of Gaddabout?"

"There's no help for it, eh, Nella?"

Nella said nothing, and Major Erle, probably taking her silence for consent, left the room in obedience to Miss Seton's summons.

The fresh arrivals had taken the apartments adjoining Nella's. Through the thin walls she could hear sounds of conversation and laughter. Derrick's voice was audible, and its tones were gay. After a while he came back bright and cheerful. He said apologetically to Nella—"They wanted me to arrange all sorts of things for them, and after that I could not resist half an hour's chat over old times."

"Two hours," corrected Nella, looking up at a time-piece.

"Was it so long, really? But that little woman, Miss Seton, is really very amusing. They are going home in a few days," he continued musingly. "They would not make bad travelling companions, only——"

There was an awkward pause.

"Only that I am no fit companion for any woman," Nella said coldly, and marched off with a stately air and unquiet heart to her bedroom.

"Oh, 'the pity of it!'" she moaned. "What a waste——"

For the first time it was clear to her that she did not suffice her lover—that it was possible to him to weary of her and gladden in society of some one infinitely less.

Meanwhile Derrick also was pensive. The idea of Nella's not being good enough for the old Duchess of



Gaddabout was too absurd. Even little Charlie Goodchild, the latest and most unsocial acquisition to the Rapids, had heard of the duchess. Miss Seton, too, was "amusing" in a sense which he would on no account have desired any woman dear to him to have imitated; but then the duchess had never compromised herself by being constant to any one admirer.

"If Nella had stayed at home and had a dozen lovers, there would have been no fuss made about it; but she must go in in for the 'Fly from the world' business. And it was a great mistake, poor girl!—a great mistake;" and Derrick shook his head sadly.

His reverie was broken by the sound of Miss Seton's voice in the passage.

"Major Erle, dear Major Erle, do come here an instant," she cried.

Derrick opened the door, and the sharp-cut terrier face peeped in.

"Dear me, how comfortable you look here!" she cried with affected surprise. "Quite domestic, I declare."

Derrick, growing hot all over, edged away from his room to hers. "Let me come and talk here," he urged, but Miss Seton seemed in no haste.

"I want you to promise something," she said in a whisper, and with an affectation of mystery she brought her lips into close contact with his ear. "I want you to promise that you will take me out for a walk to-morrow, if it is fine, while the duchess enjoys her afternoon nap. She never attempts a hill now, and unless you will come I shall lose all the fine views."

She paused, for at that moment Nella descended the stairs. For an instant Miss Seton's eyes did not lose their sparkle, nor her attitude its air of tender coquetry. Slowly she released Derrick, saying, "I shall expect you to-morrow." Then she turned round and faced Nella, as the latter, pale but proudly beautiful, swept past the couple. The eyes of the women met. The keen black ones looking impertinently unconscious into the grave brown glows that gave lustre to Nella's pale face.

"I was determined to wait and see how the creature dressed," Miss Seton afterwards explained to her patroness,

"but of course I cut her dead. Velvet at two guineas a yard, and such Honiton—isn't it shocking?"

That night Nella, said, "The weather is clearing, we will leave to-morrow."

"Oh, we needn't go to-morrow," objected Derrick, "unless you wish it."

"I do wish it," she said passionately. "How can I stay here to be pointed at as a social pariah by those women, and to see you going over to them, enjoying their talk and their company. I know now how the shipwrecked feel who see their last raft slipping from them, dancing gaily off on the tide, while they 'go down into the deep waters!'"

She wept bitterly, and he was infinitely touched by her distress. He soothed her kindly, and agreed to go home at once.

"I did not mean to hurt you. I wouldn't vex you for a dozen like her," he said, indicating Miss Seton by the direction of his hand.

He "did mean it," and "that's the worst part of it," groaned Nella. But she was grateful for his kindness, and exerted herself to be cheerful again.

She was unreasonable, of course; but that was one of the curses of her position. She and Derrick could not afford to love each other reasonably. Love was the only tie that held them together, and when Derrick grew reasonable that tie must be slackening. They started for England early the next morning. She put aside her forebodings for the present, and did not feel melancholy again, until he bade her good-bye at the threshold of a little house he had taken for her in Woldshire.

"You will soon come back?" she asked, with pleading eyes and hands that clung to his, loth to let him go.

"I shall come back directly I can get away from my people. I hope you won't be dull, sweet. Linton Park is close by, and as the house is empty you can have the run of the park. I have arranged this for you with their agent. We have managed very nicely getting you here so quietly, eh, Nella? No one saw you, no one knows who you are."

Nella flushed. She could not but feel the ignominy of her position when Derrick reminded her of it.

"You are the only person who knows me and knows where I am ; do not leave me long alone," she said wistfully.

He promised anything, everything. He was in haste to catch his train, and under those circumstances a man is apt to perjure himself. He was received at home with immense rejoicings. He arrived on the eve of his birthday, and the bells were rung in his honour, and Lady Dionysia invited a large party to dinner to meet him.

It was clearly no fault of Derrick's that he should be enjoying himself in his father's home, drinking with the best men and dancing with the prettiest women there, while Nella was trying to familiarise herself with the strange and desolate aspect of her lonely little room ; but I daresay it would have made her even more heartsore had she known how he was employed.

She was thinking so earnestly of him, that she could not but believe that he was returning the compliment.





## CHAPTER XL.

“THE LONG, LONG, WEARY DAY.”

“**D**ERRICK, I want you,” cried Nella to the solitude, and the solitude was bland and unanswering. No one, no thing but herself, seemed to crave any one or anything. The very shadows of the lime leaves were motionless; beyond their delicate tracery the earth was brazen in the September sun. From a cluster of red brick kennels, which looked like a hot coal burning in the haze, came fitful barkings from hounds who were too indolent to keep more than half an eye on the drowsy world. The flocks moved slowly through twinkling heats, lights, and cool glooms, haunted by their bells. The peacock on the garden wall sunk his blue breast low in the ivy.

It was afternoon, and the world was drowsing. Linton House was as slumbrous as aught else. The windows were vacant, the doors closed; no blooming flesh-and-blood faces showed dimly behind the shimmering veils of glass, no woman's dress fluttered through the doors, no lad sent out a cheery greeting to an expectant dog, no child's laugh broke the monotony of the fountain's drip with human music. The house was dumb, deaf, and blind. Within were art treasures obscured by dust; red flames of sunshine streamed down oak floors that never echoed a footfall.

Nella, looking through half-closed lids at the desolate pile, thought moodily, “It is like myself—dead with loneliness.” She had made herself a stranger to all but

one, and that one was becoming a stranger to her. Like the house, she was an unused treasure. She had love for him, which he had ceased to seek; she had dark terrors, which he had ceased to brighten; there were beautiful nooks of thought in her mind, which he had ceased to explore. At one time he never tired of counting every glory of his possession. Then he had sought solitude to whisper to himself, "Such a way our eyes met at a common thought," "Such a touch her hand gave back to mine at parting." Then he had counted every day of absence with feverish impatience; now he was away from her, and voluntarily away!

We excuse our loved one's waning love so long as we can. We shrink from the agony we guess of, and we apologise, saying, "This or that makes the love seem less which can never lessen." But there are moments when a keen pang of conviction pierces the veil with which the heart would stifle reason. Suddenly the past and the present confront each other. The lover of yesterday was sensitive and irascible; the lover of to-day is impervious and smiling. Yesterday he or she was burnt up with jealousy; to-day he or she looks relieved if any one else absorbs an attention which has become oppressive. "Your dress is cut too low," storms the youth. "Who gave you that flower?" snaps the girl. In the long to-morrow of indifference he forgets that she has shoulders to be bared, and she that rosebuds don't grow naturally on dress coats.

It is not always by sudden gestures or passionate exclamations that we express our greatest needs. There is a yearning which broods about our souls, until we feel sick and faint under its sultry weight. There was a power of longing in this woman's still eyes and listless hands. The warm flower-scents made breath sweet. The very face of earth and sky was a grand benediction. But it had become impossible for her to enjoy greatly without his companionship. The mateless plaint of the dove was between her red, sad lips. "I want you, I want you," she sighed; "I want that we should be *together*."

They were often apart now, in the spirit as in the flesh; but there were times when they seemed to be one again. "We can at least enjoy a fine day together," she thought.

The same dull, sweet air could soothe them both; both might listen to the pleasant clink of the milk-pails and the low of the flocks huddling to their herdsman's call.

As these pleasant sounds died away, and the sun's rays twinkled westward on the Linton casements, Nella's loneliness deepened. "Is it possible that you are not wanting me as much as I want you?" she cried in a passion of supplication. "Have I no longer any magnetism for you?"

She did Derrick injustice. He did want her—or at least he would have done so, had he chanced to be thinking of her. He still loved her in memory, and was apt to call her name when he should address others, and moved tender hands in search of her in those half-conscious moments before and after sleep, when all that was sweetest (or bitterest) in our yesterdays masters coherent thought. But at this time Derrick was busily engaged in slaughtering his father's partridges, and numberless little victims to his breechloader were realizing that life was not half so beautiful as it had seemed one painless moment since.

"A beautiful day, and first-rate sport," Derrick said as he trudged homewards, tired, but with that benign expression on his tanned face peculiar to Christians who feel that they have done a good day's butchering.

"A terrible day," Nella said, watching with moody eyes the fading day. "And what will to-morrow be?"

She sat listlessly in the shadows until she was chilled to the heart by depression. She looked at the empty house until it became a horror to her. It had glowed in the sun; in the darkness it was one more frown added to the brooding landscape. Mysteries grew in the solemn woodland which crowned it, and in the clouds which lowered over its turrets. She fancied that she saw a breath dimming one of the lower windows, and heard whispers behind its oak door. She stroked her dog's head, and bespoke his attention for comfort. But dogs have their superstitions as well as human beings, and her collie selected this moment to glare and retreat at some fancy of his own. Alternately peering forward and circling back to her feet, he gave low, nervous growls, which put the

climax on her nervous irritation, and she turned and fled from the spot.

She raged at her own folly. She felt utterly wrecked. Her mind had been shaken to fragments by the storm of passion which had passed over it. She tried to interest herself in some occupation—played a tune, and broke off at the second bar; took up needlework, and paused to tangle her thread; tried sketching, and fell into an old childish trick of scoring the paper with scratches representing dismal little avenues leading to nowhere; then wandered between the fire and window, and wondered why life was so much more lonely now than it had been in bygone days, when she had watched the sky-line and thought of far seas. She was realizing, by a process of slow torture, that while she who loves and hopes is never alone, she whose love has outlived hope is alone for ever.

It will be seen that Derrick had not kept his promise to return "very soon."





## CHAPTER XLI.

"THEN YEARNING UNFULFILLED."

**W**HEN the shooting season was nearly over and the hunting season not quite begun, Derrick found time to come to the little white house. To-day he is sitting by the fire—his dog on his knees, his newspaper in his hand, and Nella is staring out of the window, taking abstract note of the landscape.

In a *tête-à-tête* of the sexes, the man generally adheres to the comfortable side of the room, while the woman as instinctively makes for the window. There is sentiment in a window. There is a stage in love affairs where the man is magnetised to the region of draught, and flattens his nose against the pane, nestling close to his idol, with his arm about her. There is another epoch less effusive and more domestic, when, without quitting his seat by the hearth, he cries, "Darling, come here!" And there is the last act in the drama, during which he neither follows nor calls, but reads his paper as Derrick did, and is content to caress his dog.

The woman looked at him askance; his gaze scanned the paper; she paced the room impatiently, and the sweep of her garments at last succeeded in fretting him.

"Don't fidget so, my dear."

"My dear!" muttered Nella savagely. "I hate to be called 'my dear' as a matter of course."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"It seems to me that you are unreasonable."

"Ah!" with a sigh of exasperation. "That is a man's word for his own fault and a woman's suffering."



There was a pause ; the wainscot creaked uncomfortably, the fire leapt comfortably, and the dog got up, eyed his master, and curled round again.

Nella's passions were ever at war with her experience. Experience taught her that to feel is sufficient weakness ; to show feeling when there is no response for it is defeat. She steadied her voice and the edge of her mouth, and spoke calmly—

"Derrick, I think you are tired of me."

He looked at her a little wonderingly, and then at the fire, as if he were considering a problem she had given him.

Her heart got heavy and cold. Where was the passionate disavowal, the craving lip with which he would have met her words in the old sweet days—days when she made the weather for him, and the dog was not on his knees ?

"Are you ?" she said impatiently, the flame in her heart nearly breaking through the ward she had set on it.

Then again, stabbed by each of her own words, she spoke—

"Are—you—tired—of me ?"

"No, dear ; of course not. What makes you think I am ?" he answered, dimly aware that if it were as she suggested, it would not be kind of him to assent.

Feeling himself further questioned by the growing pathos in her face, he went on with some impatience—

"Why do you put such things in my head ? Of course I'm not tired ; I should *never* tire if you'd only let me be happy and at peace."

"Peace is indifference," she said dryly.

"Yes, with women ; because all your idea of love is storm. I can be very fond of a person without wanting to quarrel with them."

"You can be very fond of your dog, your horse, and your dinner, of your arm-chair in that degree," she retorted.

He moved comfortably in his seat.

"If all women were but as consistently easy," he murmured.

"You forget your old passions as if they were receipted bills. Were it worth while, I could remind you of a time when you were wild with fancies," she urged bitterly.

"It is *not* worth while. Life cannot repeat itself; besides, I was very uncomfortable then. I'm glad not to be so now. Look here——"

"Look here" was always the prologue to one of Derrick's unwonted fits of eloquence.

"Look here, Nel, I'm very fond of you, I believe. I'm pretty sure that I should miss you if you were away. When you're in a sweet humour you light up all the place. I like to hear you playing me off to sleep after dinner; I like to tell you my worries; you give a sense of home to my life. Be easy, and let the stream go smoothly now it's in full course; it only bubbles and fusses when it is new-born, you know. When I have sometimes caught myself running after a new face—(Nella winced)—I ask myself, 'if we came together, how would it be with you and me twelve months hence?' Why it would only be a second-hand Nella, and probably a second-rate one. Of course, I know your face too well to be always looking at it, but then its reflection is fixed in my life. I know your mind so thoroughly that I rarely converse with you; but then it's a comfort to know that if I choose to mine, I can always find a glint of gold. You have all the charm of possible attractions, all the influence of convenience. Do be content with the love I bear you, and come and give me a kiss. Stop; let me stir the fire!"

He looked quite tired with the sound of his own voice, and sighed with a sense of ill-usage at not finding a ready acceptance of his theory. He was sensible even to cruelty, and he was but owning what she had divined for some time past; but when all her vague unrest, all her bitter discontent, found expression in his own voice, she felt smitten by the curse of an irrevocable doom.

Love endured, but withered! Who that has plucked a rose in blossom prime was ever content to winter life with a *pot-pourri* of mouldering leaves? What made its royalty? Sun, colour, and fragrance. There is no aftermath for such a delicate glory.

If he would only get angry, or reproachful! He was so terribly kind; he meant to be considerate, and he was implacable.

He lapsed again into repose. The storm was sobbing

outside, and its wild trouble was all the sympathy she received. She knelt by his side, and put her arm about his throat.

"See," she said passionately, "I touch you, and you don't know it. I watch for you, and you don't see it. I wither in your absence, and you come back bright and gay. I stamp out such hours in a fury of weariness, and you hope that 'I haven't been dull.' Why can't I be content? Why do I not peacefully collapse into stagnation? I don't know why; I suppose a woman's love has more wealth, a greater ungrowth of tenderness which perpetually thrusts forth new life. I can understand that it would be possible to live as you approve with another man, but not with you. I have been queen of you once, and I can't be beggar now. There was a time," and her face as she spoke glowed with memory, "when your whole life was incense to me. Even my craving heart was satiated with the richness of your heart-gift. Your every thought was drawn to me; your face was at its happiest when turned to me; your eyes welcomed my every entrance, your lips delayed my every exit. When two people have crowned each other with the sham halo of a divine hallucination, is it worth while to sit out the end in the dust and ashes of common-sense indifference? My love, we have been our best to each other; and I am still at my best for you. All the while I have been speaking I have felt the spell of your touch on me. I would like to forget it all—to choke up all the trouble by a kiss of your lips; but if you can only pay me back in kindness—if, loving me, you are no longer one whit in love with me—then I must go!"

There was silence. While speaking, her eyes had sought his in an agony of appeal; but her face grew very pale in that pause, and she sickened so with pain that she dropped her head against his knee, and thus waited his answer. The dog lifted his head, and licked the intruding cheek. The master looked into vacancy, with a troubled expression.

"You *could* not go. What could you do?"

It was her sentence; and before he could speak again, to express his regard for her, his regret at the untoward nature of her disposition, and his willingness to kiss her

and make it up, she had nerved herself to a last effort of dignity.

"We will talk no more about it," she said. "I see that there is no resurrection on this side of life. Make up the fire; it is cold. I am going to read a book, while you finish your paper."

Derrick breathed a sigh of relief.

"There's a good girl," he said. "I trust we shall never have any more of this. Were you really unhappy? Not that it affected your eloquence. But, then, I have never known a woman too wretched to talk."

Nella answered, without looking at him—

"There are maladies in which a cessation of pain means death."

"You're not half comfortable in your way of talking yet," Derrick said uneasily. "Play me a tune, and soothe me into fifty winks before dinner."

She acquiesced at once, and set her fingers nimbly about the keys, until the desired result was achieved. Then she left off gradually, so as not to awake him by a too sudden silence, and stole back to her seat by the window.

And the fire went on musing, and the rain and the wind vexed each other with contradiction, and the woman's heart went on breaking, and Derrick's dog was having a pleasant little dream, in which Victory and a bone were the prominent ideas, and handsome Derrick slumbered, and did not dream at all, and—

"This is the end of every man's desire."





## CHAPTER XLII.

L'AMOUR FAIT PASSER LE TEMPS, LE TEMPS FAIT PASSER  
L'AMOUR.

**D**ERRICK slept, his face smooth, almost smiling in its content, and the woman stared at the fire with tired eyes. She was so weary with despair as to look as impassible as himself.

"It might be better to gather up all life's agony, as it were a knife, in one's hand, and stab oneself with it!" Then she looked at his dear face, and sickened with the dread of its absence. "It will be such a wrench," she moaned, "and yet it seems certain as the death-pang."

The night darkened, the storm died away. Had the wind kept shrill, and the leaves wild, it would have been less intolerably oppressive. The dull, still fire, the grey stagnation without, seemed accomplices to the terrible paralysis that was growing on her heart. "It was a day to feel buried in," she thought.

Derrick awoke presently, patted the dog kindly, and kicked him out of the way; condemned Nella for having allowed the fire to get low—"a fellow gets so chilled sleeping!"—and, to check a shiver, he put his arm round her, and drew her to his side.

"Still moody, Nell?" he said, stifling a yawn in a kiss of her hair.

Her white face reddened for an instant. It was not love, it was love's reflex, that shone in his downcast eyes; but his look and touch had power to make her glow. She

nestled close to him, and turned on him eyes irradiated by the past.

"Do you remember the Terrace at Vere?" she said softly. "We walked and ran there; caught our breath under the garden wall. My hair was rosy with blown petals. You kissed them off. You put some in your pocket-book. Then we knew it at night. When the moon shone between a cleft in the fir group, your face hovered over mine, and blotted out the moon. How you loved me with your eyes!"

"Nell, I love you now," Derrick said kindly. "You seem to be protesting against the present with the past. This is sheer sentiment."

She smiled faintly, and clasped his two hands.

"Sentiment is a word hated of men, isn't it, Derrick? Especially in the mouth of a woman for whom a man has ceased to feel it. Yet the woman who possesses none is coarsened below the finest instincts of womanhood. It is by sentiment you win us, by sentiment you might keep us, if you cared to do so; and it is on a question of what, I suppose, you call sentiment that we part."

"Part!" he echoed blankly. "Do you really mean any of the nonsense you've been talking, Nell?"

"Don't think that I don't know all the sharpness of the word," she said, with a sudden quickening of her even tone. Then she steadied her voice. There should be nothing harsh even in the sound of her farewell words. She knew that the brighter part of her life was dying, as surely as she should one day know that the moment of fleshly corruption was near; but she meant to meet the death-agony bravely.

"That of to-day is hardest to bear," she thought. "There'll be no light left—none, until the final decay; then, perhaps, heaven will thrill me with a tremor of the hope which comforted the Magdalen."

"You are uprooting your life," remonstrated Derrick, "and you are making me very uncomfortable, and all for nothing."

"I am uprooting my life, and throwing it aside like a dusty weed," she said gently. "But it is for your happiness! You have ceased to love me in the only degree

which can compensate for all the loss I bring you. There comes a time when a man needs all the comfort that life can give him. Unhappily, the woman who loves you, to her own misery, can no longer make your happiness. That power having failed her, she herself is counted as a failure."

"Of course, I know that we have acted unwisely," he admitted, "but still I do love you, Nella; and I owe you some——"

"Hush," she cried, putting her hand before his mouth. "Don't say such things. You owe me nothing. You are bankrupt in the only wage I cared for." She leaned her head against his breast, and dropped a few still tears. "After to-night I rest here no more!" she sighed.

"That will be your own fault, Nella."

"Yes, my own fault," she assented; "let that comfort you, Derrick, afterwards. You didn't urge me to go. Many men would have lacked your patience and constancy. I knew of one once. He did not wait to let the woman find out she was a flaw in his life. He left her suddenly one morning, kissing her a good-bye as usual. In the evening she heard he was never coming back. She thought it out all night, and at dawn she killed herself and her child. He, the fool, was miserably penitent when he heard this. That was because she died. He did not take into the count of his repentance all the terrible bitterness to her of living. He sorrowed over the crowning but merciful agony which alone could repair his error, since it enabled her to forget."

She lifted up her pale face.

"Good-bye, Derrick!"

"You don't mean it," he said incredulously.

"Yes. It isn't a quarrel of the old days, made up of a pout, and comforted by a kiss; like those childish rages in which the sweet aftertaste of reconciliation always lurked. When we sulked then, Derrick, we said good-bye for ever one day, and were heart to heart again on the next; we tore off the trinkets we had exchanged, and affected to despise them, holding them tight all the while. Our passion, whether in its acme or failure, has passed beyond the region of petty symbols. I don't leave you this ring, which you put on my hand that day on the sea when I gave

my destiny into your keeping. How the waves flashed, and the stones in the ring, and your eyes, when I murdered myself with a 'yes.' I don't leave the trinket, to mock the greater value of all that I leave with you. I don't care to reclaim that gift of mine which shines on your own hand. You cannot give me back aught out of the great waste I have lavished on you. You have destroyed even memory. How can I dare ever to recall the past? But I can still give you something worth having—and that is your future; and I give it to you with this kiss, which is—good-bye!"

She put her arms about his throat, and kissed him, with miserable eyes, and then turned and went.

"Nella!" he called; "Nella!" but she did not come back.

Derrick fretted and fumed, pulled his dog's ears, and looked out of the window.

"What troublesome creatures women and horses are," he thought; "the tempers of the one and the legs of the other are never sound from one day to another. But she'll be sure to make it up with me. Poor darling, she has no one but me. I think I'll write her a line presently; she'll like that—women always do. Nothing they delight in more than amateur post-office work. Besides, talking is such a bore, especially when you don't know what to say."

Accordingly, he scribbled her a few lines in pencil.

"DEAREST NEL,

"Do make it up. I should feel awfully uncomfortable if I thought you were alone in the world. I spoiled your life by persuading you to come to me, and it is only fair I should bear the consequences. I shall expect you down to dinner presently. It will be very slow without you; so pray come to your loving

"D. E."

But Nella could not come down to dinner, because her head ached, she said. She would try and get some sleep now; perhaps rest would cure her by the morning.

Derrick was sufficiently contented with her answer. It sounded sweet and peaceable. "By to-morrow she will



have come round," he thought, "and we shall be comfortable again."

He went to sleep in this pleasant conviction; while Nella lay with clenched hands, wishing that each star that glittered in the window-square could sting her even to death, loathing the cool pulses of the night, and shrinking from the thought of the letter crumpled by her side.

"It is a sore," she raved, "a sore which eats into my heart. Oh, to have never met him, never loved him!"

She watched out the night in dumb agony. Physical pain would have been a relief. You may ease a wounded limb by moving it, or vary the weariness of suffering by a change of position; but what rest is there for the hurt soul—what cool, kind palm can reach that hot fire in the heart which is consuming its better part to bloodless ashes!

In the wet meadows below some cattle showed dark against the pale background of the dawn. One melancholy-looking shadow stared with outstretched neck and yearning up-lifted lip over a gateway, lowing for its lost joy—that soft-eyed, broad-faced glory that had used to wrinkle its velvet nose against the mother teat, and which now was bleating back a faint echo of the mother wail from some distant group of alien cattle.

A vague idea crossed Nella's mind that there might be distress which surpassed even hers.

"Once to have touched one's young and then miss it, must be a worse heart-wreck than this," she thought. "To-morrow the calf shall dive its head in search of its mother-milk again. I will give orders about it before I go."

"Before I go!" Her heart stood still at her own words.

Henceforth pain had passed into her life, even to its merest details. The growing twitter about the ivied pane, the beating of the flail in the golden farm-yard, the sweet, faint breaths of the brightening day—all these were patent to her acute senses, and memory and prescience sent a blight into the core of even every harmless joy.





## CHAPTER XLIII.

### BROKEN.

**H**E next morning Derrick was restless, and desired to go up to town. He was often restless now. "The country does pall on a fellow after a time," he said. He sought Nella. He felt shy, after the scene of the previous day, of mentioning his intention; but he thought he might argue her into suggesting it herself. He wandered into her sitting-room. Everything was in its place excepting the canary. There was every usual sign of occupation. He only noted the absence of the bird, with the vague hope that Nella's long endurance had culminated in vengeance, and that he had been made to pay the last penalty of his "tweets."

"To whom has she been writing, I wonder?" he said, glancing at the open blotting-book. "Poor soul! she hasn't had much correspondence on hand since—since she came to me." Then he saw that the letter was addressed to himself. "When a woman in the same house with you writes a note, it means either an assignation or a row. In this case, of course, it's the latter," he grumbled, as he broke the seal.

"I cannot face remorse for less than the love we once bore each other. I shall remember that extenuating love better away from you. Don't worry about me. I mean to be as happy as I can. I have taken enough money to pay my way for the present, and I will write again to make some arrangement with you as to my future means.

Do not go through the form of seeking me, as I do not mean to be found. Forgive my sins, for I have forgiven you your virtues. You will love again one day. My worst wish for my rival is that you should succeed. For you, that she shall tire before you do. And yet, if I were a good woman, I should say 'God bless my darling.' The greatest blessing I can grant you is in saying good-bye.

"P.S.—I have left" ("our" had been scratched out)  
"your keys on your table."

"Oh, dear!" groaned Derrick, and sat down.

It was a great shock to him, and if Nella could have seen his troubled face she might have felt comforted. True, he no longer loved her enough to know when she was in the room; but he knew when she was not there. He had perpetual need of her; she ministered to his comforts—she had grown into his life; and he felt the affection for her natural to proximity. He loved her as many excellent husbands love their wives, not because she was a woman, but because she was a habit. He should miss her; her stormy outbreaks of passion, her tender repentances, her noiseless manners, her bright intellect, and her inimitable method of preparing his coffee. And now it was past breakfast-time, and no one had made it. As he thought over these things, he almost determined to go and seek her out at once; but then, if he found her, there would be another scene, and he so disliked scenes. Well, there was no obstacle to his going to town now. So he would go. Yet he felt a little blank at the collapse of all opposition. He got up and wandered through the rooms, moody and undetermined. The soul was gone out of them, and they were as dead cocoons. He missed the stimulant of that eager, living, loving presence—that great heart which had made an atmosphere around her, pulsating with love of him.

"Devil take her! What right had she to treat me so, after all my kindness to her? How well I bore with her temper!"

Whatever came of it, the house was unbearably dull as it was. He should go to town. Perhaps when there, he

should hear from her, beseeching to be allowed to return. He dwelt on this notion complacently. He would forgive her, he thought; but they were to start on a fresh basis. She was never to take these swallow-like flights any more, and expose him to the annoyance of coming down in the morning to find a vacant table and a dull day (for he had not *quite* settled to go to town ere he sought her). But, if he forgave her, would not the same thing occur again? She was a moral earthquake, liable to sudden and dreadful quivers of passion, which were infinitely distressing and alarming to a quiet nature which wished to bask in the sun on the surface. Perhaps it was better as it was. In any case, he would go to town as soon as he had breakfasted.

Meanwhile Nella was watching at the window of the village inn, where she had taken shelter, watching with dry, hot eyes and drawn mouth the road which led from the cottage, down which Derrick must come if he meant to search the neighbourhood for her.

The landlady came to suggest additions to the breakfast Nella had ordered, and comment on its untouched state.

"Is there nothing else you could fancy, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes, please take them away," Nella said, her eyes covertly watching the window. The woman's voice and the clatter she made with the cups was terribly irritating to a mind strained to its extremest tension.

The woman stared, but obeyed, and Nella was left alone, oppressed by the throbbing of her own pulses, and never relaxing her heart-set vigil.

She watched until the atmosphere turned to flame and scorched her brain. The dingy flowers on the carpet, the delf figure on the shelf, the flowers in the jug, coalesced and went round in catherine-wheels; but the dull white road in front of her kept its identity through all the confusion. She watched until time assumed the part of a slow executioner, killing her by inches; watched until all seemed darkened, and the clock seemed to make its beat audible through the roar of far-off waves. "I can hear it in spite of the noise," Nella argued; "and I could see him if it were ever so dark, if he would but come."

The click of the garden-gate was a shock which quieted her fever. The surge stood still, the place recovered its

usual aspect, and her mind its balance, while Derrick Erle sauntered towards the inn, smoking as usual, his dog describing cheerful circles, of which his master was the centre. Derrick's face looked worried; but it was the worry of an accepted discomfort rather than the protest of a rebellious agony. Hope flushed—poor, weak, storm-tossed fool!—her grey face, and thrilled her whole being as he drew nearer the window.

"If he comes so near I *must* touch him, I must forgive it all. Better the slavish happiness of his dog than silence and barrenness. Oh, Derrick, I am here! Look at me, and go no further!"

But Derrick's footsteps were as implacable as time. Time had been murdering her for these last two hours, and Derrick came to give the *coup de grâce*. A railway-whistle shrilled in the distance, and Derrick, looking not at the inn window but at his watch, hurried his steps, and took the road to the station.

There might yet have been time to check him—yet a chance to snatch back the old life—but she could not move, her feet were numb. She called to him. She fancied that she called loudly, but her voice had not risen beyond a husky whisper. Nature avenged herself and collapsed. In the very death-struggle of her hopes she fell prostrate and inert on the floor—happily unconscious.





## CHAPTER XLIV.

MISS ROSE INGLIS.

**D**ERRICK ERLE left the station, believing himself to be an unhappy man. But it is not certain that his face would have brightened had Nella suddenly reappeared; he was already learning to put the memory of her away in those dark corners of the mind consecrated to the dead and absent. We give a solemn thought to these disused chambers as we pass the cobwebbed hinges, but we are content to let the dust thicken. He purchased some papers, and jumped into a carriage with an odd sensation of relief combating his gloom. He should not have to face that dreary little station again yet awhile, with its draggled vegetation and lonely platform.

He made himself comfortable with his wraps, and was about to unfold his *Times* (under what affliction would an Englishman be insensible to that particular solace?), when a young lady sitting opposite to him suddenly put down a paper which had screened her face, and looked out of the window, while Derrick looked at her.

Her face was the sunniest he thought he had ever seen. Her features were not very regular, but she might have personified the genius of Spring—so fresh, so delicate, and blooming was she.

"Her cheeks are pink and her lips are pink, and the pink is real. The nose is white—a rare occurrence with one so young and healthy-looking. Her dimples are lovely, so is the curve of her cheek."

Derrick, the heart-broken, thought these things behind his *Times*, and forgot the quotations for the Cesarewitch.

The young lady spoke presently to her companion, apparently her servant. Her voice had a shrill girlish ring in it, not altogether unpleasant, although it did not sound very wise. Perhaps what charmed Derrick most was the unclouded brightness of the girl's face. Care had never taught her brows to contract, nor the outline of the cheek to sharpen. Her eyes had no regret; her mouth only knew how to make dimples. There was something very refreshing in the inexperience of her beauty to a man who, like Derrick, had been wearied by an excess of feeling and intelligence. By degrees, through the medium of a *Bradshaw*, his *Times*, his rug, and the time of day, he managed to lure her into a species of conversation. Her attendant, who was old, and probably fatigued by some unwonted length of journey, had unwarily gone to sleep, leaving her dove unguarded, whereupon her dove began to prune its wings, and look pretty, and the kito commenced a series of insinuating pounces.

"Have you travelled far to-day?"

"Oh, ever so far. I came from Brighton first, and then we had to change to this line to get home to Oakfield."

Derrick made a mental note of the name.

"Were you glad to leave school?" hazarding a guess.

"I should rather think so. Up at five in the summer, six in winter—play oneself into an iceberg. Never allowed to talk comfortable English at meal-times; the French master old and ugly. Ugh! it was dreadful."

"But Brighton is a gay place, full of company."

"Of what good was that to us, when we were always marched up and down the back streets, or away on to the Downs. There only was one bit of the walk worth anything, that was the turning up our own crescent; we met people there now and then."

"Admirers?" suggested Derrick curiously.

"There was one man, young and handsome, who used to be waiting at his door whenever the school-girls passed. We all quarrelled over him so, that perhaps it was just as well he settled the matter by marrying a girl who lived next door to him. Yet, when we heard the wedding-bells,

which mingled with the scales we were practising, we all counted 1—2—3 with heavy hearts."

"How fresh she is, how unaffected!" Derrick thought. "Some man will have a pleasant task in moulding her character."

He did not even shrink when she produced from her bag a box of bonbons and disclosed her white teeth crunching burnt almonds.

"I stopped at the confectioner's before we got to the station," she explained. "I was determined for once to have as many as I could eat. At school the girls were so sharp, that at the slightest rustle in your pocket they were down upon you to go shares. But I've got such a lot, you are quite welcome to some," she added, with an after-thought of hospitality.

Derrick declined, and remained silent awhile, as the lady's tone was incoherent while the sweetmeats lasted. Then he went on drawing her out.

"What were you taught at school?"

"Two pieces of music—'L'Impossible' and 'Un Caprice Chaotique'; two songs, one a good one for Sundays, the other for week-days. Then we did languages: 'Have you want of a razor? I have want of a razor. Hast thou not want of a razor?' and so on."

There seemed room for education, Derrick thought, but then who could weary of teaching such a lovely pupil? She was irrepressibly gay. She could scarcely forbear breaking out in little odds and ends of song. She was jubilant as a lark nearing the dawn—a kitten playing in the sun. She was a child on tiptoe, clutching at life as a dainty, and all tremulous with anticipation.

"I am never to go back there any more," she said, with evident satisfaction.

"Will your brothers and sisters be pleased to see you back?"

"I have none."

"And your mother?"

"I lost her when I was an infant," the girl said, trying to look sad. "But I've got a lovely horse." And her face beamed again. "I shall ride with papa."

"What is papa like?"



"*An old darling,*" with emphasis. "He lets me do whatever I like."

The train stopped, the servant woke up, and her mistress relapsed into silence. She was evidently smitten with sudden and vivid shame. She would not look at Derrick, and answered him with a frigid monosyllable when he offered to assist her out.

"We are going to stop. There's papa on the platform. Thank you, sir, but my maid will carry the bag."

She was out in an instant, and Derrick was discomfited.

"And I don't even know her name," he thought.

The train was just moving off, when he saw that a dressing-case had been left under the seat. He caught it up promptly and jumped out of the carriage, and addressed himself to a tall old man, whose arm the girl was hugging.

"Some one has left something behind them," Major Erle said in an apologising manner. He lifted his hat, and, turning round, assumed a look of blank dismay. The train had gone too far to be re-caught, and there he was left on the platform, with—

"Three hours to wait afore the next up goes," a local porter said cheerily.

The old gentleman peered through his spectacles at Derrick's face.

"I am very sorry that my daughter should have been the cause of your losing your train," he began.

Derrick tendered his card.

"I cannot regret any chance that has made me acquainted with one of father's old friends," the latter said, with a rapid glance at a portmanteau label. "My name is Erle, nephew of the Dick Erle you used to know in the Rapids. I have often heard him talk of Colonel Inglis."

The elder man grew more upright and soldier-like in an instant. The very name of the Rapids was a rejuvenation. Some further explanation followed, which established Derrick's identity, and Colonel Inglis became most cordial.

"Bless my soul, how like your uncle! The Erle eye; eh, Rose? Very like, indeed; but not so good-looking.

You can't expect to be that, my boy. Dick Erle was the beauty man of the regiment. Of course you'll come home, and dine and sleep?"

"But my portmanteau——" objected Derrick.

"We'll telegraph for it, and a man and cart shall wait to bring it over. And, Rose—what are you pulling my arm for? Oh! I forgot. Let me introduce my daughter. Miss Rose Inglis: Major Erle."

The pair bowed formally; but Rose did not speak. Her glance said plainly, "Don't tell tales out of school."

Thus it was at eight that evening Derrick was partaking of a remarkably well-cooked dinner in the dining-room at Oakfield. The wines were fine-flavoured, the host courteous. The hostess was a fresh, white-shouldered little girl, with round throat, bead circled, blushing in white muslin, and having some trouble in keeping up the dignity proper to her new position. When the dessert appeared, in fact, Derrick detected her hand once or twice *en routs* to her pocket.

After dinner she sang her song—the weekday one.

"Oh, she is young—my lady is young.  
And that's the best of it all,"

she chirped triumphantly; and Derrick, applying the words to the singer, thought that in truth there was no grace like that of seventeen.

She played her pieces. "They'd be as good to go to sleep on as anything else, if she wouldn't strike quite so hard," Derrick argued.

He was charmed by her bird-like fitfulness. Even her carelessness of him had its attraction—that of novelty, maybe. He did not recall his trouble and Nella until he was dropping to sleep. Then he resolutely put the thought away from him—mentally adjourning his grief until the morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nella went back to the cottage. The fever that had raged in her mind left her weak and tired as though she had suffered some long and prostrating illness. The world had stood still for her in that moment when Derrick disappeared, and she fainted. Now it was going

its course again much as usual. She saw plainly that the flowers and the clock in the inn sitting-room had their separate identity, that the landlady must be paid for the untasted breakfast, that she could plan no further journey for to-day, and that she must return to the house, and make some explanation to her servants of her temporary absence.

Oh, the sickness of coming back to vacant rooms lately tenanted by your heart's desire! Silence and space sometimes constitute a moral coffin, which despair nails down about your face, shutting out light and life, and all this world's future.

Nella watched out the day with that dumb, questionless agony dying animals sometimes show. She had nothing to ask of Time; she realized it all. Derrick had tired of her, and had left her. There was no doubt in the voice of the wind, no hope in the sickly rays of the dying sun.

The night darkened, and he was not there. The stars came out, and looked peace at her agony. She watched them with bright, hot eyes. Everything she looked at was strangely vivid. She tried to sleep; but her trouble was so terribly alert it held her until the last moment of consciousness, and before she was half awake she again felt its clutch on her.

She rose early, and sat down ostensibly to eat her breakfast; but she felt guilty of shifting her usual seat, so as to sit with her face opposite the path by which the postman must come. There was a sickly hope latent in her mind, which she tried to disown even to herself, that Derrick might have written when he reached town—that it was in anger, not indifference, he quitted her. But the letter-bag only contained circulars and newspapers, and these she did not open.

The flush died away from her pale cheek, and her hands ceased trembling, as hope grew still. For a month the days died, and were reborn with the same monotonous accompaniment of clouds and quiet rain. The season seemed becalmed. Every morning she watched the sodden path by which the post came; every evening she walked at a rapid pace through pale-yellow glooms, trying to forget the long period that must elapse before another

day and another post were due. The cattle sometimes left off browsing to eye her; the crows dispersed their assembly at her approach; the farm-dog barked, "Who are you?" at her; but otherwise no one heeded her coming or her going.

One day she saw a girl and boy walking down the lane. Their whispers, their awkwardness, and the kiss the boy snatched at parting, showed them to be lovers. "Poor fools!" she said; "they're at the farce. They don't know the pain of the drama yet. To think that I once had a face as young, and was kissed! And what has it all come to?" What had it come to? A moral existence, worm-eaten by error and grief, to a face aged prematurely, to an aimless vigil, and all the infinite humiliation comprised in the word "deserted."

She wrote once to Derrick, simply to inform him of her determination to retain the cottage as her home. She wished him to continue some allowance to her. She named the extent of the sum—a very small one—she would consent to receive. "Having given you the best of my life, I cannot be too proud to accept some means of existence from you. Indeed, I have no other resource. Good-bye, Derrick. I wish you could have loved more or I less."

"As if I didn't love her," Derrick said indignantly, on reading her note. "I gave way to her in everything."

He was back in town now; but his stay at Oakfield had endured two or three days—long enough to send him to his London chambers with a sort of sensation that a bright country flower had taken root in his memory, filling it with bloom and fragrance. So dull was he, that he felt half inclined to run down and see Nella.

When a man is softening under the spell of a new attraction, he is inclined to be diffident; and true feeling and modesty being more or less inseparable, Derrick was asking himself if he were lovable, and longed to bask in the glow of Nella's heart-fire, if only to reassure himself of the warmth he was able to kindle.

But then he was not sure of his welcome. If the fire were dark, cheerless, and fuming, he might have some trouble in rekindling the fuel's latent splendour. He

disliked trouble. He shrank from the idea of the savagery of Nella's eyebrows when her face was set with displeasure against him. He did not know, or did not choose to know, that he alone had the power of creating such displeasure, and that its right name was disappointment. He repeated again and again to himself that she, not he, had been to blame in this rupture, and that few men would have loved her so faithfully. He re-read her letter, and saw no sign of welcome in it. Oh, fool! not to divine that when a woman in Nella's position writes the word "love," it can only be read as being in the present tense! There was a tone of accusation in it which jarred on him. A man has a natural antipathy to a reproach, and to a woman who constitutes herself his supplementary conscience. The still small voice may be stifled, but the querulous knell of a lover's ring on "*once and now*" is more difficult of suppression.

"I should like to see her again," Derrick owned to himself, as he sat alone in his chambers. "Life is dull work without her. I didn't feel it so much at Oakfield somehow."

He was half inclined to go to her the next day. It would be pleasant to see the light of welcome broaden in those dark eyes, to feel the round, tender arms twine about his neck; and he should like to tell her about his new acquaintances. He had been so long accustomed to rely on her sympathy in exchange for his confidences, that reticence was a constraint to him. And it ought to be a consolation to women who have deemed the world "well lost" for love, to know that, when the love is lost also, they can as a rule retain some influence over their lovers by assuming the position of an all-giving, naught-receiving mother, or that of a superior sort of housekeeper—minus the character.

"Nella shall sing me that song—

" 'Oh, she is young—my lady is young,  
And that's the best of it all,' "

hummed Derrick. "How she would admire Rose Inglis if she saw her!"

He thought he would certainly go to Nella the next

day. Meanwhile he strolled down to the club, and dined with a young friend—Mr. Ted Grahame—who remarked that Derrick looked moped, and suggested change of air.

"The fact is, London is played out for us," averred this used-up man of two-and-twenty. "I'm off to Italy to-morrow for six weeks. Come with me. As soon as I've done touring, and written a book, my career as a Rapid will be quenched, and I must marry my cousin, Rose Inglis."

"Marry whom?" echoed Derrick, in consternation.

"My cousin. She's an heiress, I believe. It is a family affair; she's got my portrait and I wear hers (when I think of it). She and her father are going to winter at Rome, and I shall just take a look at her when I'm doing the galleries."

Derrick became thoughtful, and a shade more depressed. "I wonder what made me think you a nice lad?" mentally apostrophising his unconscious host. "Conceited jackass!"

"Much better come," urged the other. "It will be much jollier to face brigands in company. If I am captured, you can telegraph to my creditors. They'd be sure to ransom me."

"Much too good for him," mused Derrick.

"What did you say?"

"That it would be very good fun."

And so the plan was settled; and Derrick, still moody and pre-occupied, sat down to write his answer to Nella. He fell naturally into the old trick of address, and wrote to her as "his dearest." He said their separation was a great grief to him; he wished he could have made her happy; as he could not, perhaps it was better as it was. He had loved her sincerely, and would always be her friend if she would let him. The sum she had named was far too small, and he entreated to be allowed to quadruple it. He had been made very miserable by her decision (and, as he wrote this, the sense of loss, combined with the effect of Grahame's and Rose Inglis's engagement, did in fact bring tears into his eyes, and a very respectable sized one on to the paper). He did not care to stay in England now; he wanted change of scene and air. As

to his promise, of course he should keep it, if there ever was occasion; but that was not likely. (Here he sighed—he did not ask himself why.) His bankers, Messrs. Hoard, would give her his address if she required it, but his movements would be uncertain for some weeks to come. With every hope for her happiness, and a request that she would let him know if she ever wanted aid of any sort, he was her loving friend, Derrick Erle.

Having thus quieted his conscience, he wrote to his bankers, purchased a travelling bag, and consulted a *Bradshaw*. Nella, who had carried a heart of flame through all the dull-grey days, whose lips wailed Derrick's name with an eloquence which must have been audible to him had he still loved, and whose eyes were growing mad with watching, received this letter on the morning Major Erle left England.

She received it with a rush of pulses. "Oh, my dear, my dear!" she muttered; "he is back with me at last." She read it and understood; she was paralysed by it out of all action. She no more paced the dim roads, nor urged in thought the speed of the letter-bag. She sat inert at home, and the cat was happy in her mistress's quietude, and in her dreams by the fire purred of mice. Her mistress sat by the fire also as the days grew more grim and cold, but she arranged her seat so that she could always see out of the window. The autumn paled into winter. All the gay, buzzing, fluttering life of flower, insect, and bird was bitten out by frost. A few chrysanthemums still reared their heads with uncorrupted sap, but they looked but cold-faced Christians, prone to pride themselves on their exceptional constitutions rather than give a starving bee a honey-drop.

Hope starved in Nella's heart, and each day's moveless burthen seemed to weigh more heavily than the last. The meadow-pond, with its moody taciturn face, began to haunt her. If she could but get over the horror of the chill and the agony, she might gain peace. She was ebbing into that morbid condition of mind when the action depends on an accident—when the fine balance of reason is displaced, and the gloom of clouds or the drip of rain create a doom.

But the day came when a thought which was almost a hope took possession of her, and drove out all sinister visions. As the days went on, and the doubt became certainty, an entirely new feeling possessed her. It was a strange mixture of terror and joy.

"I must write and tell Derrick," she thought; "surely he will come to me then."

She tried to argue herself out of her incipient feeling of happiness. She thought how dark would be her future; how perfect the misery of a mother whose child was visited by her sin; how inconvenient to Derrick this extension of a tie he was weary of. She thought with inexpressible bitterness of Derrick's possible indifference to the life for which they were both responsible; but though her arguments had all the sadness of reason, a feeling stronger than reason—the old-world instinct which made Eve glorify heaven for the birth of her first-born, though she had lost immortality and had endowed him with death—the something which gives the forest beast a human heart when its cub licks its dugs, which fills the human with a brute-like unreasoning devotion—this one love, common to all God's creatures, and paramount when it exists—began to thrill Nella's heart. But it was not until some months later, when a being with a cry like a toy-dog blundered its indefinite nose against her breast, that she realized that she had only been in love with Derrick, but Derrick's son had made her in love with life.

She craved for Derrick to come, not that she wanted to see him, but she wanted him to see the boy; and so each of the pair had found a rival for the other—Derrick in the flesh, and Nella in the spirit.







## CHAPTER XLV.

### OR RUNS YOUR MIND ON ANOTHER LOVE ?

"And who will be your bairn's father  
Till Love Gregory cum hame?"

\* \* \*

"The Lord will be my bairn's father  
Till Love Gregory cum hame."

**F**OR awhile Nella existed in an almost speechless state of ecstasy. She was shy of expression of her joy, it moved her so deeply. Another soul seemed created within her—a soul so beautiful that she feared to commune with it, lest the precious visitant should take wings. The throb of the mighty mother-heart has the solemn cadence of an organ when its chords are first stirred. It is not until the child ages, and the joy becomes more assured, that the maternal lips revel in those incoherent caressing sounds, which can be best understood by angels, mothers, and children.

The winter slipped away almost without Nella perceiving it. Her old nightmare the pool was fringed with forget-me-nots, and rippled by a stately duck and a succession of flighty yellow puffs which constituted her family.

The summer was come, and Derrick had never answered her letter. She wrote to his banker, and was told that Major Erle had gone to Egypt with some friends, and had given no intimation of when he was to be expected in England. "What a lovely surprise you'll be to him, my pet," she said, tenderly apostrophising the infant Derrick,

who seemed to pass his life in solving problems through the medium of his thumb.

The sting of expiated sin, shame, and despair—she forgot them all. Her child's touch made her feel as if there might be mercy for her in heaven.

The down on the boy's head had thickened and curled, and he could talk gibberish fluently, and utter a few decided expressions of will in distinct English by the time Derrick Erle came home again. He did not come in obedience to Nella's summons, having missed her letter. Nevertheless, she was the first person he came to seek.

Derrick returned as he had departed, with anger in his heart against Nella. She had pledged him to an interview with her under certain circumstances, and now the time had come for the interview, and the thought of it made him feel uncomfortable. Why did she bind him to come?—a letter would have done just as well. It made a man feel so ill-bred. The old passion was buried by time and indifference. Why could not she now be content to accept the position of a comfortably entombed deceased first wife, without insisting on being resurrected at this inopportune juncture? "It's raking up dead leaves," he grumbled; but he came, for Derrick ever kept his verbal pledges as a man of honour should.

He had confessed to Colonel Inglis, and to Rose his betrothed, a good deal of his past, and they had given him absolution. Nella's real name was, of course, concealed. She was referred to as "an unhappy entanglement." Colonel Inglis dismissed the subject briefly.

"Allowance her—nothing extravagant, you know, but sufficient to keep her from want; don't give her any excuse for saying you haven't behaved like a gentleman to her."

"What sum would you think sufficient?" hesitated Derrick.

"Well, let's see. You have arranged to settle £1000 a year pin-money on Rose, and to entail all your solid estate on your children. You must remember what you owe to the future, my boy. This woman left you by her own desire, you say—went off with your particular friend, I suppose?"

"It was nothing of that sort," interposed Derrick hotly.

"Well, well—glad you think so. A hundred a year will be ample."

He approached the subject more cautiously with Rose; he felt shy of even hinting to his future wife what over-much love for him had tempted another man's wife to become.

"Was she pretty?" was Rose's first question; and she waxed sulky at Derrick's admission that the "entanglement" was handsome. Also she objected to his reserve. "Why don't you tell me more about her?" she urged. "Did she dress well? and did she care for you much?"

"I don't care to talk about it," he answered; "I would like to keep your mind fresh as your face."

"I tell you what it is," Miss Inglis said candidly; "I have lived at school, and I've been out one season. I hear what women say of each other, and I read the newspapers. Don't try and make a saint of me, Derrick. I never heard of a town-bred saint. And do tell me if she wore great pearl chains and heavy locketts, like all the lovely women in the photographs."

"Don't talk folly," Major Erle answered angrily. Like most men whose manner of life has not been unexceptionable, he was very strong on the subject of propriety. "Experience has taught me that a woman cannot be too circumspect," he said.

Unfortunately for Nella she had formed part of the experience. She had shaken down the forbidden fruit, and while she did penance Miss Inglis garnered the advantages.

He felt very queer in retracing his steps to the cottage. How should he find her? Would there be a row? Would she have anything fit to eat for dinner? Confused images of Ulysses and Rip Van Winkle came into his mind. Should he find that she had changed during the long slumber of his love? It was dusk when he arrived at X— Station, and the familiar place showed dimly, like a scene in a half-remembered dream. The dream-like feeling increased as he walked down the road. In this locality had once existed for him a great emotion; it had

belonged to another life; but each familiar object that reminded him of the strength of that life's love relit something of the old glory. Through the window yonder he had seen the fire blaze, which was to welcome him; at that threshold she had fallen about his neck. . . . As he drew nearer the watch-dog altered his mind about barking, and wagged him a greeting. It was growing more real every moment. Yesterday was overleaping to-day. He could not find it in his heart to turn into a formal visitor, and ring and knock at the door, to be met by a servant's wondering stare instead of the glad acceptance of Nella's eyes. He walked gently to that sitting-room window through which Nella had gauged all the agony of quiescence, and looked in with wonder in his soul.

She was there, and so far yesterday was still to-day. But was she mad? She was sitting on the hearth-rug holding a burthen in her arms. Derrick's first impression was that she must be crazed, and was caressing a doll. Had he been more experienced he would at once have recognised in the lowered lids, the tender turn of the wrist, and that charming protective gesture with which birds expand their wings over their brood and mothers curve their arms about their young, the ineffable grace of maternity.

The burthen began to unfold itself, yawned and kicked, and finally sat up, flushed and rather morose. It snubbed the mother's cheerful attempt at conversation, and demanded food. Being gratified, it became more amiable, and vouchsafed an occasional smile—not at her, but at some comedy private to himself which he recognised as existing in life. There were no signs in the room of Nella's old occupations. Her easel was forlorn and rigid in a corner; her books of poems were neglected on the shelf. There was a jubilate in her life now which out-psalmed all lesser songs. Her fine critical faculty was not required for the analysis of Mother Hubbard's history, nor her wealth of intellectual sympathy needed for the exploits of Carabas. Bright-coloured fiction of this sort was scattered all over the room; a moody toy-horse bowed his heavily-maned neck in a corner; a wheelless

cart lurched helplessly on the floor; and, the greatest wonder of all, the living puppet opened its eyes, and dimpled its mother's breast with fat impetuous fingers, or kicked vigorously at invisible foot-balls.

"Now, boy," Nella said with an air of authority, ludicrously at variance with her state of utter subjugation, moral and physical, "call mamma."

A feeble imitation of a sheep's ba-a followed, but Nella seemed to accept it as classic English.

"Now pap-a."

The result was even more satisfactory, the boy laying especial stress on the final syllable, as if, having got it, he did not mean to let it go for awhile.

"Now say your name."

The boy pursed his lips, and took a breath. Evidently the effort was prodigious.

"*Derrick Erle*," he said slowly, with wide gaps between the syllables.

And as the mother cooed her thanks above his rosy face, the boy kicked himself to sleep again; and the watcher by the window, thrilled to his heart's core by his child's unconscious summons, bent his head before the judgment of all-seeing Heaven, and said humbly, "God forgive me!"

A slight tap at the window, a peculiar whistle, which had been wont to herald Derrick's former visits, sent the blood from Nella's face. She put down the child on an adjoining couch, and ran trembling to the door, and let Derrick in. With a gesture to him to move quietly, she helped to disembarass him of his coat and hat, and led the way to the sitting-room! Without speaking, she walked up to the couch, and lifted the light coverlet that sheltered the face of the sleeping infant; she looked up from him to his father, and met the latter's eyes.

"Oh, Derrick!" she whispered; "he is ours—our very own; he binds us one for ever. Is he not beautiful? But you cannot see his eyes; they are your eyes over again. Oh, my dear! my dear!"

She went into his arms, and clung about him, pale and weeping, yet always keeping her voice subdued.

"When you left me, Derrick, I thought I should like to

die. The days were lead; that dreary autumn time seemed to bury me. I think I was going mad, only he came in time."

"Why did you not tell me?" Derrick said huskily.

"I wrote to you, of course. I knew you had not received my letter, or you would have come to me. I was very lonely at one time, with no one to comfort or advise me; but after he was born I was proof against neglect. Besides, he is such a companion, and he *talks* a little. Oh, Derrick, if you could but hear him!"

"I have heard him, but his power of conversation seemed limited," Derrick said, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"He can say mamma."

"Ba-ba," corrected Derrick.

"And he is so good."

"I saw him try and give you a black eye. His fist, not his will, lacked strength."

"At least, you won't deny that he is beautiful;" and she picked up the babe, and, swaying it on her breast, brought it to Derrick. "Kiss your son, papa."

With his face flushed, Major Erle brushed the soft cheek with his moustache. Nella looked at them with resplendent eyes. She put back the child, and crouched down by his knee.

"I am so happy—so happy! My heart has been aching for you ever since you went, and you left me in anger. It was all my fault, Derrick; I was unreasonable; my love was irritable and pettish. But we are something more than lovers now; we are parents. You'll love him, won't you, dear, and make up to him for our sin? Oh, my soul! my soul! my heart is bubbling over with happiness, to have you and the child in the same room. I have dreamt of it; it is beatitude. Kiss me—kiss away the memory of those sick hours when I cried for death to heal me. How like you are to the boy, Derrick; his every feature says 'Father' to you. You will protect his future, will you not? You can give him wealth and position. Oh, Derrick, love him and love me. With whom can you be so supreme as with me? He makes us kin; he is flesh of our flesh, and blood of our blood. I can never look at him without seeing your eyes;

and you will feel kindly towards me when you see hints of me in your son."

She spoke in whispers, broken by sobs, but her face was sunshine. She caressed his wrists with infinite tenderness and humility. There was a pause. Derrick looked at her with troubled eyes.

"She has forgotten all about my promise," he thought. "How can I tell her? Why was I ever such a fool as to sin? Remorse in this world, condemnation in the next—that's the weak-minded, kind-hearted sinner's allowance."

The fire blazed up, and showed his face whitening under the influence of a painful resolution. Nella noted this, and the nervous twitch of his hand.

"What worries you?" she asked softly. "Is there any bitterness to you in being with me again?"

"Yes and no," he answered, without meeting her eyes.

"You are not—oh, Derrick, you're not thinking of leaving me again; you could not be so cruel!"

Her face was as pale as his own, and such an anguish came into her eyes, as you see in those of oft-hunted animals whose lives are passed in the torture of pre-science.

He put his arms about her passionately.

"Heaven knows that had I foreseen all this, I should have acted differently. I left you a little wearied, as you perhaps have guessed, by your caprices, and believing that you could not care overmuch for the man you deserted; yet, had I known all—your love's endurance and that boy's existence—I should not have to tell you— Look at me, Nella, pity me, for I am miserable. Do you remember what were to be the circumstances under which you bound me to seek you out.

"You do not mean—oh, man, you are my husband by nature's strongest bond!—you do not mean that you come to tell me of your *marriage with another woman*?" Her voice was husky. She recoiled from his knees, and looked at him with sparkling eyes. "Is *this* what you come to say?"

"Yes."

"You are going to marry?"

"I have promised."

"But here is the absolution of your promise" (pointing to the infant). "Derrick, every weak-natured man is liable to become a blackguard—a wind may blow him to heaven or hell. If there's sufficient justice hereafter to meet all the injustice of this earth, you won't go scot free. But you can't mean it—you can't mean to desert your child, and have his voice bearing witness against you in the dark hour!"

"I do not wish to desert him," muttered Derrick.

"Do you think to part him from me?" cried Nella, with fury. "Do you think I will ever let another woman hold him?"

"I will do anything you like about the boy," Major Erle said despairingly. "But I am engaged to Miss Inglis, and I can't retract my word of honour."

"Honour!" echoed the other scornfully; "a fickle mind has no honour. Is it honour to create a love you cannot repay—to accept all and give back half? Is it honourable to this boy that you should put aside his claims in favour of perhaps another son? Is my child less innocent than his younger brother would be?"

"It's worse than I feared it would be!" groaned Derrick to himself.

"Have you told your betrothed of my existence?" Nella asked, a sudden hope relaxing her face.

"Of you—in the abstract, yes. I thought myself bound to do so. Practically, of course, she knows nothing of your name and station."

"And it made no difference to her?"

"Not very much," Derrick admitted reluctantly.

"If you had told her of this new additional tie, would she still claim you?"

Derrick remembered with what equanimity his *fiancée* had discussed deep moral sores, and said that he "thought she would!"

The child on the bed stirred, and hit his face violently with his arm—a sign of awakening. Nella lifted him up and rocked him on her breast. She did not look at Derrick for some while, but stared into vacancy with such an expression of hopeless woe as would have made even



an indifferent spectator heart-sick to see. The man's face looked wretched; he was smitten by remorse—and remorse is the impossibility of atonement.

Presently she spoke in a tired voice, all the fire gone out of her manner, "Why don't you go?"

"I am going presently," he said humbly. "But won't you forgive me? Won't you let me make some arrangement with you to ensure my being of use to you and the boy hereafter?"

"I will consider of it," she said coldly. "There is no need to decide now. Do you think, amidst other necessities, of buying him a ready-made father?"

"I will be as much of a father as circumstances will permit," he answered.

"You mean you will take such interest in him as you might in a charity school *protégé*. But he is not altogether orphaned yet—he has me, and I have him. We have no need of you, go away!" She turned away from him, and attempted to sing the child to sleep, but her voice was hoarse and broken. "I can't remember any tune," she muttered.

"For God's sake don't send me away in such pain of mind," Derrick said with agitation. "Say that you forgive me, Nella!"

"What does it matter?" she groaned. "If by forgiveness you mean that you wish not to be the object of my personal wrath, you may take that assurance. I am too much broken to feel wrath; but my forgiveness will scarcely expiate your error, even to yourself. Now will you not go?"

He bent down and kissed the child—he would have kissed her, but she shrank from him.

"I do not *like* you," she said simply. "I do not hate you, but I would rather never see you again."

He left the room and went out into the darkness. She seemed relieved by his departure, for presently he heard her voice singing snatches of an old ballad—

"Lie still, my darling, sleep awhile,  
And when thou wakest sweetly smile,  
But smile nae as thy father did."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Be still, my sad one—spare those tears  
To weep when thou hast wit and years.  
Thy griefs are gathering to a sum,  
God grant thee patience when they cum."

"That's a dismal tune," thought Derrick; "I like Rose's song better."

He walked away sadly; the dream had deepened to a nightmare, and he felt as if Rose Inglis's bright smile and gay tone would hardly banish that sinister vision.





## CHAPTER XLVI.

### CHURCH BELLS.

**N**ELLA held her child a little closer for the next few days, and her lips hovered oftener than usual over his flossy hair.

"My sweet," she murmured, "they can't quite break my heart when I've got you. Yes, do talk to me; I love to hear you talk."

She smiled to herself at her own infatuation. To have learnt so many languages, and to think his gibberish the best of all! Of what value is a woman's intellect when a child's tugging fingers can pull her down to a state of glorified idiocy? Philosophy dies with the mother's milk, and science is prized for its latest invention in toys. But her love was not healthy; it was too concentrated and feverish. There is all the difference between the favourite puss who nurses its kit by your hearth, all confidence and purr, and its draggle-furred sister, seeking remote corners in which to hide her happiness, deemed contraband by dogs and boys.

Nella thought of the state Derrick's future children might keep, and ground her teeth. Her boy would never command rich clothing, much service, and that kindly interest which most households take in the baby monarch of the hour. The sense of the wrong she had done her child was almost an expiation. His existence was her remorse, but also her delight. She shrank from the

thought of his future, but she could not wish him unborn. His cry had a magic no other sound had, his slightest sigh stirred her slumber; to feel his baby feet thumping her palms was a happiness that made her feel innocent as an angel. The worn, pale woman, with eyes that looked tired by tears, would glow and brighten as she played at being a child with little Derrick.

He exacted the most prompt obedience from her; he insisted on her metamorphosis into as many shapes as there are in the animal world. Could his notion concerning her have been coherently expressed, he would probably have credited her with being a very nice toy, which played bo-peep until he was tired of laughing; when he hit and scolded it, a horse which was never weary of careering round with him on its shoulders; a machine to feed him when hungry; a pillow to sleep on—an arrangement, in fact, constituted by beneficent nature for his especial service.

And for this the mother gave back such a passionate wealth of devotion. And the cleverest woman among us is liable to become a victim to this one-sided barter—a voluntary victim who cannot feel her martyrdom for joy of the heaven she sees beyond it.

Derrick looking sagacious, and pointing at the marvels of his nursery world with an unsteady forefinger; Derrick inquisitive as to the vitality of animals, deeming that their eyes were finger-proof and their tails made with a hinge; Derrick acquisitive, appropriating every bright-looking article he saw for the purpose of suction; Derrick cross, Derrick in an apoplectic fit of gaiety—in every aspect he showed royal to his slave and mother—a vital kaleidoscope which she never wearied of eyeing.

The year wore on, and Major Erle's marriage had not yet taken place. He had become so excessively moral in his tone since he had inflicted that last injury on Nella, that Miss Inglis became rebellious. She confided to her bosom friend, with whom she never quarrelled, excepting on the subject of admirers—

"Am I not to see Schneider again, nor go to dear Lady D——'s, who is so pleasant? And if she has 'sprung a gurb' in her morals, as cousin Ted says, what business is

it of mine? Those good, strait-laced women never give you comfortable *tête-à-tête* nooks in their rooms, and dim sentimental conservatories don't enter into their composition. On the whole, I think I had better have the run of one more season before I marry."

Thus it was August before Miss Inglis consented to relinquish the advantages of her free state. By that time town became so dull and empty that she decided to marry *pour passer le temps*. Major Erle was all for a quiet wedding, having the Englishman's usual fancy for entering into the holy state, as it were with a skeleton key and list slippers.

His betrothed was incensed. "What is the use of being married at all," she cried, "if I'm not to get the presents and all the accounts of my beauty and my veil in the fashionable papers, to say nothing of the envy of my friends? I'd be married twice over to make those D— girls wretched."

"Thank you," Derrick said drily.

But the charm of her rose-bud face drew him nearer to her, and made him excuse her jarring words.

"The sacrament of marriage——" he began, with a tender stroke of her glistening hair.

"Don't, dear, talk in that way, and make me feel as if it were going to be a funeral. Marriage is a bishop, choral service, Messrs. Hancock, and Brussels lace. And think, too, of all the bridal gifts I've been taxed to give my friends. I shouldn't die happy if I hadn't taken my revenge. Indeed, darling, I shouldn't *feel* married without all these things."

"Where shall we go when we are married?" Major Erle asked.

"Well, not to the country, it's such a waste of ew clothes. Let's go on the Continent, while my costumes are yet in fashion."

Derrick assented. He had taken somewhat of a horror of the country, feeling as though a lonely roadway, bordered by sad sunset hues, would recall that nightmare, with her desolate face and burthened breast. To say that he was punished by any agony of remorse, would be untrue. Few of us suffer as keenly from that cause as

we think we do. The strong passionate nature, that errs in a convulsion of feeling, as Herod erred against Mariamne, may suffer a moral suicide, even while it destroys; but Derrick Erle's fault had not been one of violence and precipitation. He hardly knew where his penitence should begin and end.

Satiety is a Lethean draught in respect of some memories. He forgot how earnest was the feeling, how wild the delirium with which he pursued Nella. Hence he was puzzled to account for the results. He owned it all mistily as "a mistake," but was sometimes worried by the after-thought that a "mistake" and a "crime" are in some cases synonymous.

"It can't be helped now," was a shibboleth which soothed him like an expletive or a cigar. It was Nella's epitaph.

By the end of July it was Rose Inglis's epithalamium. The young lady bade adieu to her father the evening before her nuptials, for the good and sufficient reason that she wanted to get the crying over before her face and head were "made up" for the ceremony. All her packing was finished. She left nothing behind her but a few disused dresses, and a desk containing bills, withered flowers, and locks of hair—the identity of the latter had got confused by promiscuous contact with each other, and so were, as Rose remarked, "hardly worth taking."

They were married with all due pomp. Rose was radiant.

"It all passed off beautifully," she said. "It's been the best spectacle of the season. Didn't I do my responses well, Derrick? You know, I took lessons on purpose from Mrs. C——"

"What!" Derrick Erle said aghast, "took lessons from an actress how to swear your oath of love and duty to your husband?"

"I don't see that the oath would have sounded any better mumbled, as if I had hot potatoes in my mouth, and with no proper gradations of tone," Mrs. Erle said pettishly. "I am sure I put the most affecting emphasis on 'obey,' and every one was quite touched by the feeling with which I murmured 'until death do us part.'"

\* \* \* \* \*

"We will go to the gravel-pits and play with the bun-

nies," Nella suggested to her sovereign; and he, blinking assent, she spent Derrick's wedding-hour in beguiling her son into the notion that the rabbits were made to bob into holes for his especial pleasure.

The sound of Derrick's marriage chimes could not vex her ears in that quiet nook.

Henry VIII. had such a selfish and feudal idea of harmony, that he made the bridal bells of Queen Jane sing a second to the toll for Queen Anne. Derrick, selfish and modern, only cut out the heart. The head being left in its place, enabled the victim to enjoy reflection and memory.

In the gravel-pits there was no injurious sight or sound. She sat under a thorn-tree, sheltered from wind by the warm hill. The child peered into one of the holes that honeycombed the red sides of the pit, praying for some of those furry flashes, which moved so fast as to seem all tail and hind-legs, to "tum out."

The placid wethers, moving by inches down the slope, the colourless tune of the mill-stream afar off, the child's innocent laugh—it was all balm to Nella. She forgot herself, and became part of the landscape. There were flushing may-bushes, pierced by the sun. There was a shiver of waters, a hint of roses in the farm-garden yonder. For a moment she was of these things—had neither past nor future. Then came a break in the trance, which was neither sleep nor dream. The distant church-bell began to toll, and Nella involuntarily put her arms about the child, and carried him away from the region of that ominous sound.

"They are always spoiling the summer, those little village churches, with their melancholy comments," she thought vexedly. "If one is to believe that bell, the poor are never christened nor married—they only die. I wonder who it is affords them the late luxury of a funeral knell."

Derrick looked towards the belt of woodland, green-gold in the sun, and pierced by the grey thin spire.

"Bell!" he said triumphantly.

Talk of the awed beauty of Cortez' face when he stood "silent upon a peak in Darien;" watch a child's eyes

leaping at discoveries in his life's dawn ; above all, watch them when they are transfigured by a strain of music ; the age of the soul's immortality seems then for a moment to deepen in those tender orbs—making them ancient as for ever.

Derrick went home, keeping time with voice and hand with the bell, but broke off presently, complaining, "I so told!"

Nella looked at him wonderingly. The air was hot with sun, and he had his usual amount of clothing on. She pulled the shoes off his feet. They were chill, while his head was burning. "He has caught cold," she thought, with a thrill of remorse. "I kept him out too long."

Derrick made no further complaint that night ; but he did not gambol in his bath as usual, did not splash the water in his mother's face, and was more than ordinarily thoughtful over his thumb. He had caught no cold ; but the poison of low fever had come with the breath of the autumn winds, and Derrick sickened.







## CHAPTER XLVII.

### PRESSING THE RUE.

**L**ITTLE DERRICK sickened with a drooping of the head, heavy eyes, and flushed cheeks. Symptoms which had first showed so slightly that none but a mother or a doctor would have taken alarm at them. The child could not explain his trouble, but he ceased to be noisy. The illness of children and animals must ever be a terrible mystery to them. When a high-spirited horse goes sulkily, and a lively child becomes still, there is generally an evil latent. Derrick could not even put his pain into thought, but tossed his head from side to side, moped, cried petulantly, and rejected all his old joys with impatient contempt for their inability to take away that heavy weight on his brow.

Nella, with sinking heart, sang her gayest songs to him, and converted him more than ever into a mechanical toy; but he rejected her in every shape save that of a patient drudge, who would never cease walking up and down the room with him. She murmured lullabies to him, and he listened now and then, but broke off again into a wail. Then he slept, with a rising fever in his veins, which showed in his flushed cheeks, and pulse rapid as a bird's.

Nella was immensely consoled by an interview with the parish doctor. He gave the child physic, smothered by treacherous jam. He dignified the case by putting it into Latin; but at the end of his explanation one English word slipped out. It was "teeth," and Nella took heart. She repeated that key-word to herself during many a weary hour. The child's uneasiness was her agony; but

she was not yet alarmed. It was not until some days later, when the fever gave place to pallor, when the eyes grew dimmer, and the head rested yet more heavily on the mother's shoulder, that the medical man owned there was more mischief going on than he had expected;—in fact, it was a sharp attack of low fever, and the boy would require some nursing.

Nella had been pacing the room nearly all the day, the boy considered quiet an aggravation of his malady. She did not cease her patient swaying movement, but her burnt-up eyes looked hard at the doctor.

"Do you mean," she said, "that he is in danger?"

The doctor winced. He had often met that glance from mothers before, but never without feeling himself a criminal.

"An ailing child is always more or less in danger. The mechanism is so delicate that any derangement is serious, but there is no immediate peril. If we can throw off this lethargy, we shall get him right again in a day or two."

A day or two passed, or, as it seemed to Nella, three great suns came and burnt her head, three great moons passed by, unheeding, over the fir-tops, and no answer came from heaven to her unceasing prayer for mercy.

The child's wails were less shrill, but more monotonous. He was tired by pain—tired nearly to exhaustion. The eyes seemed neither to sleep nor see—they shone dimly between half-closed waxen lids. The little hands never clasped the mother's breast now with that fierce impetuous clutch which had used to thrill her with deep-rooted joy. They showed him bright colours, but he did not heed; brought him new toys, which he would eye feebly, then drop, unable or unwilling to hold them. And Nella's arms never relaxed their hold, although they grew stiff and cold, as if they had died; and she traversed the nursery carpet night and day, with a dazed impression that the hours were marked by a tread-mill, on which she expiated an old offence in unutterable torture. Still she hoped. There was a God—He must soon relax her agony. There was a great mercy on high, and ere long the child's eye would lose its languor—the face recover its baby shape—that little mouth, which was now a pathetic drawn line, would

lose that dark fever-ridge, and pout like a dewy rose-bud once more. That miserable wail, which was becoming the echo of a wail, would be replaced by the old happy coos and chuckles, which used to fill her dreams with music.

The doctor became outspoken, and said, "There is danger."

Nella, still rocking the child, looked up. "Save him!" she cried hoarsely. "Oh, doctor, save him! I watch him night and day; I've prayed until my heart is dry. Do you think I don't care because I can't cry or faint? I daren't cry; my eyes would get eaten out, and I could not see the wish in his; I can't faint, for I am horribly strong. My arms are like blacksmiths'; they won't relax while he's in them. I think, feel, and see with awful vividness. Oh! to see a hope in your face! Doctor, doctor, save him if your heart isn't stone! He's all I've got; he's life itself to me. Why was he given to me if he was only to be tortured? Fancy torturing an innocent thing like that! But it was to punish me, perhaps; only that doesn't seem just. Doctor! can't you speak one word of blessing to me?"

The doctor had once had a child. It was represented now by a little white stone and a mass of snowdrops. Perhaps the glimmer of these dazzled his eyes even to dimness, for he looked away from Nella.

"Madam," he said, struggling with the pang of his memory, "I am not a deity. I have done my best. Remember there are other things precious in the world besides this poor babe's life."

The mother darted a look of fire at him.

"Nothing!" she said. "There is nothing else in the world for me." She dropped her drawn face on the little arm, stiff and wax-like about her neck, and kissed it.

It was piteous to see how she restrained the passion of her caress, lest she should disturb the child.

Little Derrick was getting nearly beyond the power of feeling disturbance. No more clapping of hands at the sunbeam on the wall; no more unsteady efforts at locomotion in pursuit of the coy kitten. In the first stage of his illness he still liked to stroke and kiss the warm fur; but now he did not notice her wildest gyrations, so she sat

up in a sunny corner, making merry out of her own resources—namely, her tail.

The doctor turned to go. It was hard on him, he thought to have to witness the agonies of a heart in its death-throes, as well as the physical wreck of his patient.

"Is there no one who could help you?" he suggested to Nella.

She shook her head.

"There is only one mother in the world for him. There is only one object in the world for me," she said. "But he will live, doctor. It is hope that keeps me so strong. Did I not hope, I think I should dash my brains out. I should cease to believe in heaven. See now, I have just given him his stimulant. He is a little brighter, is he not? He looked at me. God sent me that look. It is only your cold-hearted lovers who resign themselves to despair, because they do not wish to hope. He will live to regenerate me, and I shall die one day, with my son kneeling by my side. Oh! I know he will live!"

The doctor left the room.

"He will die in a day or so," he said to himself. "There is no healthy reaction. He is only kept alive by the stimulant, which I'm bound to give him, although morphine would be more merciful. When he dies the woman will collapse. Is there no one I can send to?"

He went into Nella's sitting-room. There was a letter open on her desk, containing her last received remittance from Messrs. Hoard, "On account of Major D. Erle." The doctor hesitated; then remembered the face of the woman upstairs, and the utter loneliness of her position, and conquered his honest scruples. He opened the pink slip of paper, took down the address, and went off to the telegraph office. The message merely said—

"The child is dying."

"If it is any one who loves her, he will come. If he does not come, perhaps he will send some of her friends to her," the doctor argued. He hardly understood Nella's history, or he would have recognised that when a woman defies the world for her lover, the world revenges itself, not only by withdrawing its friendship, but by constituting itself a successful and permanent rival.

Derrick Erle was at Oakfield when he received the message—then more than twelve hours old. He had not been married ten days. Rose was charming, of course, and he was a happy man, but he was also rather a bored one. The *Times* did not arrive until it was a day old; the cook was not so good as when he first visited Oakfield; Rose had not yet learned to play the piano softly; the Colonel seemed to grow in prose and years. It rained incessantly. If Rose and he had been strangers, the pleasing excitement of a budding flirtation might have made the whisper of the rain a pleasant accompaniment to their own; but there was nothing illicit in murmuring love-coos to his wife. So he did not emulate the doves, which breasted the verge of their cot, in loving contiguity, watching for possible peas in the hailstones, but smoked, stalked from window to window, and thought what a deal of tuition a woman wanted before she got well-broken into your ways!

Rose, on her side, yawned a good deal; tried on all her dresses until she was tired; finished her last box of chocolates; thought Derrick a darling, but rather fastidious in his requirements; and looked extremely pleased when her cousin Ted unexpectedly came to call.

"Isn't it jolly?" he said. "I've come down to the barracks, to take my turn with recruits. I can look you up nearly every day."

Rose thought and said it was delightful. Derrick was less effusive; but then the visitor was not a young and pretty woman. Neither had Derrick any special joy in perpetual variation of his attire.

It was in the evening time, after dinner, when the communication from X—— reached him.

Rose was at the piano, singing fitfully, now and then stopping to chatter with her cousin. Their light, unmeaning speeches, their gay tones, and unthoughtful faces, made them like a pair of bright shallow brooklets, bubbling and racing one against the other. The urn hissed on the tea-table; the old colonel dozed by the fire, unabashed by the portrait of an upright, handsome young man, who stared at him from above the mantelpiece, in a slightly quated uniform, as though saying, "Are you not

ashamed of yourself, old Jack Inglis, to bow your back, and drop your grey beard before such a handsome young fellow as young Jack Inglis? The old Colonel snored, the Persian cat on the rug purred, and Derrick was vacillating between a desire to stop the dust of voices at the piano and a lazy inclination to stay stretched at ease in his chair, when a servant handed him a telegram. He opened it, languidly at first, with one hand dropped on the floor, the other fumbling at the paper.

Then he read, and grew white and sick. He turned to meet his wife's glance. She was not heeding him. He thought of another pair of eyes he had known, unsurpassed for devotedness, save by his dog. The dog was eyeing him uneasily now, ready to uncurl itself at the slightest intimation. He must go. He could not be so inhuman as to let that woman suffer alone, as he knew she must suffer if she lost the child. He remembered what a hymn there was in her eyes and voice when she spoke of the boy; and it was his own boy. If he ever had another son, how should he look at him if he felt guilty of neglect towards this one? He supposed she had sent for him. She still loved him, then, and he was indispensable to her in her supreme moments. That laughter yonder jarred on him. He liked his brook, it was pretty, and fresh voiced; but the sea's passion is fathomless—its voice is a soul, and your eyes are less prompt to weary of the shifting splendour of its face.

He went up to Rose, and drawing her aside, spoke of the sudden and dangerous illness of a friend. Would Rose object to his leaving her?

"You see, my love," he said, "I leave you with your father."

"Yes, and with Ted," Rose said cheerfully. "I will try and not be dull; Derrick, because I know you would rather I were happy. Must you really start to-night? How cold and wet you'll be!"

"I shall start at daybreak," Derrick said. "I will try to be back in the evening."

"Very well, dear," Mrs. Erle said sweetly. "I have only one thing to beg."

"What is it?" Derrick answered, looking somewhat like a child expectant of a sweetmeat.

"You *won't* wake me up before you go, will you, dear? It makes me feel so dreadful all the next day, as fagged as though one had been at a ball, with none of the pleasant recollections."

Derrick was silent; somehow, a sentence of Nella's came into his mind—"Remember, you have been loved once!" he felt more than ever now that he owed that woman some reparation.

He had to leave in the middle of the night to catch the up mail train.

By the time he arrived at X——, it was daybreak. All was still, grey, and lonely. What colour there was, burnt in a ball in the east, like a hot heart in a stagnant life. A weird-looking crow floated past the sun, a shadowy herdsman drove a group of darker shadows through the dim meadow-gates.

Derrick, shivering and depressed, hastened forward to the little pale house yonder, lifting his feet uneasily at the sound of crushed snails. For, as I have told you, he was tender-hearted, and avoided nature's law of slaughter when he conveniently could.





## CHAPTER XLVIII.

IN ILLO VIVEBAM, IN ILLO INTERII.

**T**HE house looked as if its occupants were sleeping, "No doubt the boy is better," Derrick reasoned, "and so they don't sit up with him. I suppose I had better not enter."

He looked up at the windows. One, belonging to the maid-servant's chamber, was darkened; the inmates had evidently no desire to be awakened by the early light. The blind of Nella's casement was raised, and the sickly light of a candle showed through the panes.

Derrick listened. He could hear no sound. He whistled softly, half expecting to see his call answered by a face at the pane. There was no answer; the window looked down on him, smooth and vacuous as a sentry's face.

He remembered his promise to be back at Oakfield that night; he could not keep it if he lingered too long. He thought he would go in softly—perhaps he could get a glimpse of the child. If little Derrick looked well, and Nella happy, he should go back to dinner with a light conscience and a good appetite. He turned the door-handle; the door had not been locked. In times of sickness people often grow careless of their bolts and bars. Perhaps the approach of the great terror makes all others seem useless. The sitting-room was empty and fireless. His unused cheque still lay on the desk. "She has not wanted money then," he said comfortably.



He went upstairs on tip-toe. If he got a peep of them, even while sleeping, it would remove the doubt suggested by that sullen window and sickly light. He saw, through the half-open door, a form darker than the sheets crouched on the bed. Whispering "Nella," he entered, and found her whom he sought. The woman who raised her head, and looked at him for an instant, was Nella; but not the Nella he had known. Had she been long dead, and he had resurrected her face, to have one look at it for old love's sake, it could hardly have seemed more strange to him. Hollow-eyed, with drawn cheeks and sharpened features, she lay, huddled up on the bed by the side of little Derrick, whose shrunken face was a small duplicate of her own, only it was unconcerned.

She held up her hand warningly. "Don't wake him," she said; "it is long since he has slept so well. You can speak in a low tone that will not disturb him. He has been so ill. Is he much altered do you think?"

Derrick did not answer, but sat down by her, and held her hand. She did not look at him, nor notice his gesture, but kept the dull fire of her gaze concentrated on the sleeping child.

"It has been so dreadful, Derrick!" she murmured. "He wailed so long, day and night. I thought the sound was eating into my brain. All the dull nights, when I tried to listen to the rain outside, and the cattle lowing, he would not let me—he never tired of crying, and my heart seemed never tired of breaking. I am cold, Derrick; put that shawl over me. I was never cold when he was well, and his beautiful round limbs cuddled on my breast; but he grew very light to hold lately, and my arms scarcely felt his weight; and he never warms me now. Oh, dear, dear little hand! Would you like to kiss it, Derrick?"

Derrick bent his head over the wasted fingers, but drew back hastily.

"They are like ice!" he said. "Surely——" and then he stopped, not daring to finish his sentence.

"You won't hear him speak, Derrick; he is too weak: he knows lots of words. He is so clever. Any mother

might envy me," she said, with a look of pride brightening her wistful face.

"Can you not sleep a little?" Derrick suggested. "Sleep, and I will watch by your side until the doctor comes."

Nella shook her head.

"I dozed once. First I heard his laugh, as he laughs in health; *that* was lovely. Then I heard the little feet tramping over the floor, and that was joy; for I said, 'Presently I shall catch him in my arms, and he shall dance them against my breast.' Then I woke up to his miserable, tired-sounding moan, and felt it was worse to return to it unexpectedly than to hear it always. So I never dozed any more."

It is broad daylight. I will go and look out for the doctor," Major Erle said, and he stole away from the room without looking about him. In truth, that atom of clay, with its death-like face, and stedfast yet blind-looking gaze, was scarcely human in its expression, and Derrick the father was scared out of the chamber by Derrick the son.

He went back to the sitting-room, to wait for the arrival of the medical man, and there sat, twisting round a mechanical toy with his fingers, and wishing, as he looked at the signs of the child's old amusements, that he had contributed to them.

"I will send the poor little brat a cartload of these things when he gets right," he thought. Derrick's virtues were ever in the future.

Never was a house so morbidly still, never a room so chill and sad. Yet he could not make up his mind to face that child's eyes again yet awhile. Nella seemed to like them; she never tired of looking at them, all the while he was there. He was a little vexed in his heart that she had given him no welcome, either of eye or lip.

"I never could love a child in that fashion," he thought, which was true enough, for the one superiority woman possesses over man is the divine unselfishness of passion. The mother who is worthy the name forestalls the aureole of the angel while she bends her head over her suckling.

As Derrick watched for the day to brighten and the

doctor to come, he repented somewhat of his journey to this scene of desolateness. There seemed to be no living presence in the house. The one person not sleeping was as remote from him as though she were of another world. Nella was with little Derrick, and the child seemed afar off. In health he had been nearer to his father in his grey eyes, his resembling smile, and volatile expression. Sickness had made a stranger of him, and had given him a look that was neither of child nor man.

The doctor came at last, with a pleasant atmosphere of wintry freshness about him. His vigorous health and warm heart kept up a glow which made even his numbed cheek and the frost-smelling chrysanthemum in his button-hole look cheerful. Men there are who are ever "roses in December," and such are sunshine for the eye, especially when the eyes, like Major Erle's, have been watching a day dawn and a life darkening. Derrick went to the door, and received the newcomer with eager relief.

"How is it with the child?" he asked. "What ails him?"

"Nothing ails the child; he died yesterday evening. It is the mother I am anxious about," was the answer. "She was light-headed last night, and did not know her loss."

"She does not know it now," groaned Derrick. "Listen! She is singing to it."

The two men paused at the bottom of the stairs. The once rich voice, jarred by pain and weariness, was piping fragments of the tune Derrick had thought dismal—

"Lie still, darling; sleep awhile,  
And when thou wakest sweetly smile."

So sang Nella being at this moment—by the mercy of God—mad.

Man, ever meddling with mysteries beyond his knowledge, sought to restore her to reason.

"She must have an opiate," the doctor said, "and then we will remove the child. When she wakes up, you must break the truth to her."

Major Erle winced. He did not care to be left alone in

charge of this dormant agony ; but the doctor would not be detained.

"I am wanted elsewhere," he said, "and can do no more good here at present. I will call again at night, when I have finished my rounds."

So he gave Nella a sleeping-draught, which she took meekly, unconscious of its nature.

"It will give you strength to hold him," he argued insidiously, and Nella owned that the arm which circled the boy was in truth stiff and cold.

"I want to be strong, doctor," she said, lifting up her hungry, bright eyes. "I want to be able to play with him when he gets better."

While she slept, she was removed to another room. Little Derrick was left alone, his hand curled stiffly about a woollen lamb, the touch of which his mother had fancied would give him pleasure when he awoke—his brow quit of all headache, and his baby face set in the taciturnity of the eternal secret. The day brightened, waned, and darkened, and still Nella slept.

Major Erle sent a despatch to Oakfield—"His friend was worse ; his own services were required. They were not to wait for dinner."

The last injunction was unnecessary, for Oakfield was one of those places where dinner was law, and had an earthquake shaken the place, the half-hour bell would have rung between the convulsions.

Derrick kept conscientious watch by Nella's side. He did not look at her, not even with the look of reminiscence which says, "God, how I loved that woman !" So featureless is a spent passion in a man's memory. A woman may not love so strongly, but she recollects better.

Properly speaking, his vigil should have been one long thought of remorse ; but remorse is rarer than we fancy. Derrick thought vaguely of Nella's future, and his own possible share in directing its tenour ; thought a little of that dead man in miniature preaching at his father with all the might of his unbreathing lips and fixed eyes ; but he thought also of his own discomfort, in being detained dinnerless in this dreary place. So he stole downstairs, and made arrangements for a meal to be ready at seven ;

and when he returned, being himself sleepy, drew his easy chair up to the fire, and thought of nothing at all, but dozed voluntarily as soundly as Nella was doing under the pressure of laudanum.

He was awakened by the sound of the doctor's wheels, and went down to inform that gentleman of Nella's continued slumber. The two agreed to dine together; and ere long they were sitting by a cheery fire, enjoying an excellent meal, drinking claret, and discussing the *Times* newspaper.

Among animals, the sickly are bullied by the healthy; humans merely keep aloof from their hurt brethren. Sympathy indurates so easily that, after its first keenness is spent, we get into a way of standing outside the suffering which houses our friend.

The two argued hotly on political questions, amiably on social ones. With their faces comfortably flushed and their feet on the fender, they talked away time so pleasantly that they had almost forgotten the sleepers upstairs, when a shadow came between them and a lamp burning behind them, a hand was placed on the doctor's shoulder, and Nella's hoarse voice asked, "Where is the child?"

Both men started, and rose confusedly. The doctor recovered his nerve first, and tried to soothe her and persuade her to sit down; but she broke away from him impatiently.

"My head is stupid," she moaned, putting her hand to her forehead; "and I can't tell where he is; take me to him!"

Her eyes were so troubled and her manner so wild that he was fain to let her go, and she wandered back upstairs, somewhat with the stupid, tender, seeking air of a dog which has forgotten its offspring's hiding-place.

Her memory had cleared by the time she reached the landing, and she went hurriedly to the door of the room where the child lay, the two men following her like an antique chorus haunting a tragedy. Straight on she pressed; over the moon-lit strip of carpet in the passage; past the lattice-window, which framed the cold slanting beam; pressed on to the knowledge of her woe, with her feet stumbling over fragments of the toys which had been

piled near the bed, in the hope that its occupant would regain the strength of pleasure.

She was thoroughly sensible now, and a horrible dread was piercing her like a dagger. She had awoke to find her arms empty, and the agony of that void was shrivelling her with apprehension.

"Baby!" she cried; "Derrick, come to mammy!" Her eager arms fell about the child, and as she realized that they clasped a cold unresponsive burthen, a cry, awful in its savage agony, shrilled through the room.

"Dead! dead!—is it so? Doctor, speak! Say it's not true! Is he gone from me?"

She turned her eyes, mad with intolerable agony, on the two bystanders; she was answered by their silence, but she was yet incredulous; and twining about the doctor's knees, "Bring him back! give him something!" she gasped; "make him live! You made his pulse beat once before; it was nearly gone, but you had pity on me. Oh, doctor, make him warm! It is too dreadful to see him so! Can my heart's blood be corrupt, and I live? Oh, man, I can't live unless you give him back to me! Do, do, dear, dear doctor!" Her voice softened into a pitiful wail of entreaty, and she laid her wasted face on his hands, and wept.

"Poor thing! poor thing!" the old man muttered soothingly; "I can't help you; pray to God!"

"Pray!" she echoed fiercely. "Did I not pray when he was first ill, and suffering? But God does not hear prayers. If he ever listens to any, he would heed those wrenched from a mother. I have sinned; but this is not justice, it is revenge! It was just to make my life a shameful sorrow to me; it was just that the man for whom I erred should turn away from me—all that was bitter enough to be just, and I accepted it as my own work. But by what right was my babe created to be murdered? You say, 'hush!' Blasphemy—is it? What do I care? He can scarcely punish me in any future state; I shouldn't feel it after this."

She hurried to the dead boy again, and cowered over him.

"God would not save him; I shall never pray to God

any more. I was so grateful when he was born; each day my heart's strings drew tighter round him. Doctor, you have had a child—did you bless Heaven when it died?"

"No; but after a while I was resigned, humbly trusting we might be reunited in Heaven."

"As what? As spirits? How can that thought comfort me? I want to feel his fingers, doubling up on my breast; I want to feel his breath. No lover's lips ever could stir such an ecstasy. I want his rosy feet to thrust against my sides. I want to forget my old sorrowful self, and be regenerated in him. I had learned to laugh again with him; it was an echo of my youth. I have been a bad woman; but had he lived, my life should have been one long atonement." She clutched the child in her arms. "I can't live without you, my babe! my babe!" she wailed; "come back to your poor mammy!"

Derrick Erle leaned over her. "Poor soul, do not grieve so terribly! Comfort will come, sooner or later. You will forget in death."

He had no other consolation to suggest to this woman whose past and future were alike blighted by her love for him.

"Yes, if death would come soon," she muttered, "it would be a comfort. I should at least know my boy's secret; and if he can call mammy in that other life——"

She fell to twisting his curls round with her fingers. She was not weeping now, but numb and frozen. There is a pathos which exceeds tears. She had wept with the urgency of her appeal to the doctor; but every moment which passed with the babe cold and motionless against her breast, brought the stillness of despair in place of the flutter of an unconceived anguish.

It was over. God was relentless or deaf; the doctor helpless or stupid; this child was silent, blind, and cold for ever; would not coo to her in the morning; would not wrinkle his eyes with laughter; would not flush rosy red, nestled against her bosom. He was no longer her day-dream, her little deity, all sunshine, which she had worshipped as might a devotee of Light—her consolation, her hope.

He was corruption—only that.

Still, say as he was, clay, which was indifferent to her passionate caresses, which was ice beneath the scorch of her tears, and stiff and straight under the tender caresses and pressure of her arms; yet he was loveliest to her of all earthly things; lovely to her for what he had been. She kissed the drooped, sad mouth.

"Oh, to kiss back the prattle and the chirp of it!" she sighed. "Oh, my cold-faced babe! How my heart leapt when you first stirred into life! I know now what the birds feel when they beat their wings over a rifled nest. Death has stolen your soul; it was too white to be left in my keeping; and yet a mother who loves is as innocent as her child. Doctor, is a spirit an impalpable essence? You think the question impious—you, who are not desperate with a sense of irremediable wreck, are content to fold your hands, and lower your eyes. That is what a despot's serfs do, until some wrong, crueller than all others, pierces through their yoke, and tortures their dull hearts into rebellion; then they lift up desperate faces, and confront their judge. Hitherto I have bent and acquiesced like the rest; but now, with the dead on my lap, I ask of God—What have you done with my child? You took my heart from me, and kneaded it into this little shape. How and where shall I see it again? Will my arms clasp a shadow, or will it be the babe, healthy and gay, in whom I joyed? Shall I hear him laugh up there? Doctor, I think he is smiling now. What lifted his hair? The wind, you say; or did he stir? Is he coming back to me? Do you think I have blasphemed too soon? Oh, gracious Christ! work me this miracle, and it shall outshine all thy mercies—let his lips close on my breast, and each drop he draws shall glorify thy name. My own! I want to feel you tugging at my hair; I want to feel your hands paddling about my face. Don't cheat me with that smile, if it isn't life—one touch of your tiny fingers would still the shudder of my longing. I want you, Derrick, oh, so much!—so much! To take you away would be to tear out my heart by its roots—it is my flesh which is turned to stone—my blood which is paralysed by death. God, give him back—he is my own! Your gift



was so lovely while it moved—it is a dreary thing to see it turn to a corpse. A corpse!" she wailed, stroking the curls off his brow. "A poor little corpse; that is what you are, my darling, and I shall listen for you all the nights, and watch for you all the days, and you will not speak nor come, but will fall into dust, dust, dust!"

"This is mania," Derrick Erle said, as he hurried away, anxious to escape from the sound of those heart-rent plaints.

"No, it is only maternity," the doctor said drily. "My wife is a cheerful old lass, but she lost a babe twenty years ago, and the sight of a baby's empty shoes sets her trembling, and every evening at dusk, when she looks out of window I see her loss in her eyes. I believe time can make a woman inconstant to everything but the memory of her first-born."

"Do you think she exhausts her constancy in that effort?" Major Erle asked, his thoughts reverting to his wife and the pianoforte at Oakfield.

"Perhaps—but then men rarely possess the faculty at all."

"I was never false to a woman while she kept constant to me," Derrick said hotly.

"Hum!—So you think—but we are sometimes most faithless when we least think it. Good night, sir. Listen; that poor thing is calling some one! What is it, madam?" going back to the room in which Nella kept watch, where no watch was needed.

She came to meet him, her haggard face all working, and her hands shaking. "Oh, doctor!" she cried; "he is surely warmer—and he smiles more than ever. It is dark; you can't see him—my eyes are better than yours. Get a light! Doctor, I swear I feel his heart beat. No, you shan't take him away; for if he is dead, he is all I have in the world!"

They got the child away from her at last. They covered up the wan little face, and suffocated the mother's breath. They put him into his abiding-place, and drove nails through her heart with each thud of their hammers.

They whispered of prayer and of conviction, while that

conscious thought she had was expressed in one word—  
“Where?”

And the days wore on, and Derrick Erle went back to his wife, and the trace of the doctor's carriage-wheels became blurred with rain and moss, while Nella watched through the glooms and listened to the falling showers, with a curl soft as down meshed in her hand, and perpetual vigil in her heart.

In dreams she sometimes trembled with terrible joy—his arms moved about her neck—his voice babbled “mammy.” The dark wailing night was glorified by that flash of resurrection. Then followed the pitiless awakening; the dull birth of the hapless day; the aimless wandering from room to room; the tender clasping of all his old childish treasures. She would sit still for a whole evening, poring over an open book. The old doctor, hearing of this circumstance, expressed a hope that it might be some interesting work of fiction. “Her thoughts ought to be diverted; they are wound about one memory, like cotton about a reel,” he said.

“I hope it is a Bible,” amended the village curate; but, alas! it was only a tattered copy of “Mother Hubbard” which engaged Nella's attention, and the gaudy petticoats and angular delineation of the old dame were infinitely gracious to her for the sake of the creases and dents which had been impressed on the page by the indicating fingers of little Derrick.





## CHAPTER XLIX.

### FOLDED HANDS.

**I**N autumn, when all nature is plaintive, old love and old memories are stirred by the falling buds, and there is a soul in the weird fragrance of the dying year. Other voices than the swallows are heard under the eaves. Even Nella's sister, Dora—a woman practical rather than sentimental—looked one August morning, musingly, over a basket of stockings, at two rose trees visible from the window of her sitting-room.

"That was Nella's tree!"

Mr. Chaunter, at his breakfast-table, frowned slightly and looked "hush" with his face, then said significantly, "Dolly is here."

Dolly, an acute little maiden of eight, immediately understood that her company was undesired, and crawled under a sofa, to avoid a possible eviction.

"Nella's tree is growing nicely, but——"

"I thought it was understood that we were to drop all mention of that—that person," Mr Chaunter said, severely, putting on what his wife called his church-porch manner. At heart he was a tender-souled publican, but felt it due to his position to occasionally assume pharisaical airs.

"But she grafted it when she was a sinless child," pleaded Mrs. Chaunter.

"We are at no time sinless," interrupted her husband.

"She stole apples, and was always very untidy certainly," Dora admitted; "but she was my only sister,

William, and I can't see that tree coming into blossom without wondering where Nella is now."

As the days went on, and the rosebuds reddened and shone under spring suns and showers, their suggestions still haunted Dora's mind, so that a letter she received one morning was an answer to the vague queries in her mind, rather than a surprise to it. She ran pale and quivering to her husband. "William, I have heard of Nella! She is alone; she is ill. You will let me go to my sister?"

The husband demurred. "I don't like it. Why could not her brothers go to her?"

"Brothers!" echoed Dora, with great scorn. "Of what good are they? Gilbert would drink up all the beer in the house by way of consoling himself for Nella's illness; and Max would go about, looking like a moral cat-o'-nine-tails, and require more attendance than he gave. Men are all very well in their sphere—that is, out of doors; but they were never meant to occupy sick-rooms and boudoirs, they clatter the fire-irons, stamp on the pet dog——"

"What about Dolly?"

"Dolly goes also," the mother said promptly. "You know, William, we couldn't leave Dolly. Fancy going to bed without her good-night kiss; I shouldn't sleep a wink."

So it was settled, although not without sundry protests on Mr. Chaunter's part.

"If he didn't have his grumble out he wouldn't be easy," his wife argued philosophically.

"You must let me tell her what I think of her sin."

"First let us see how she is," pleaded the sister. Then added with a quiver in her voice—"Don't think I under-rate the sorrow and disgrace she has brought on us all. If she had been well and happy we should still be as strangers; but this doctor who writes the letter speaks of sickness and desolation. Such words should renew kinship. And then she has never seen Dolly; she does not know what a beauty Dolly is."

"I don't like her seeing Dolly."

"That is nonsense!" Dora said flushing. "There is no pollution for a child of eight."

His gentle wife seemed unwontedly stubborn. Mr. Chaunter did not quite know what to make of such rare symptoms of rebellion. Should he attempt to crush them in the bud, or should he treat them as a timid rider does some untoward freaks of his steed—affect not to notice them, and submit?

Ere he had made up his mind, he was in his carriage, and on his way to the station; his wife by his side; Dolly radiant and top-heavy, stumbling over her parents' feet. The father consoled himself by composing his "word in season."

He would be kind as was consistent with morality; he would recommend seclusion. To remove herself entirely from the eyes of an offended world, would be tantamount to repentance. He forgot that solitude implies the absence of women, and thus the chief bitterness of expiation is evaded. "She will never be able to look me in the face. She will never dare meet the eyes of her relative, and her pastor." And then he closed those soft-hued orbs, and gently dozed into a dream of homilies.

Dora's thoughts were now dark as the gloom in the heart of a wave; now bright as its fringe. Nella had brought her sorrow and shame. Mrs. Chaunter had not been able to look as haughtily as she could have wished at the forward, good-looking young school-mistress, whom Mr. Chaunter called "personable," and whom his wife stigmatised as "Minx,"—all owing to the memory of that erring sister. "Many and many a time Nella has taken all the stiffness out of my new silk, and all the importance off my bonnet," Mrs. Chaunter was wont to complain. The blot made by one member of a family is apt to run its dirty edges over the whole table of kinship. Remembering these things, Dora felt hard against the offender; but then they had dwelt in the same home, suffered the same economics, enjoyed together the few luxuries their old lives had afforded. To have "been friends in youth" is tantamount to saying "we were comrades in earth's paradise." When all is turned brackish, how we yearn towards the blessed taste of youth's season!

"I wonder if she'll think me altered. Not that I am

in the least. What a pleasure it will be to her to see Dolly! I hope she won't be too ill to talk."

If she found her sister very ill, Dora meant to nurse her tenderly until she was in a condition to bear a little gentle admonition, and appreciate the beauty and fashion of Mrs. Chaunter's new bonnet. Morally, Nella had been a sad failure, but she had never lacked sympathy with Dora's domestic interests. Talk of the community of souls twixt lover and mistress, the oneness of husbands and wives; the lovers wax cold, the husbands sour, but our sisters and our dogs never fail to meet our eyes kindly.

They had telegraphed to the doctor to meet them at the station; but when they arrived the platform was empty of all but the one porter who called out the name of the station with mechanical dreariness.

A heavy shower of rain was falling; so they got into a mouldy fly that stood outside the station, and which seemed to ingulf in its embrace the remnants of a small thorough-bred horse which professed to draw it.

They asked for Mrs. Erle's house, and the driver pointed towards a white cottage in the distance, set between laurels, now heavy with rain, and over-hung by storm clouds.

"You shall put me down and then drive on to the doctor's house with Dolly," said the prudent mother; "Nella's illness may be infectious."

So Mr. Chaunter paused only to see his wife safe and dry under the cottage porch, and drove away down the lane; Dolly thrusting forth a rebellious head, in the teeth of the gyrating splashes, to look back at her mother. With a responding smile on her face, Dora turned and rang the bell gently, as one who knows not if their appeal will pain or please.

The storm raged round the little house, and Dora's peals at the bell were lost in the melancholy roll of the thunder. Nearly blinded by the driving rain, she felt rather than saw her way to the back entrance, and tapped sharply at the lattice window of the kitchen. Within, a fire was glowing, and a country girl sate by it, peeling potatoes, smiling at a gawky-looking lad, who was festooning her hair with some ribbons and costly lace.

"Purple was Nella's favourite colour," thought quiet-

eyed Dora. "She must look after her things very ill to let herself be robbed in this way."

The pair appeared much confused when they perceived their visitor. The boy fled into some back passage, and left his mistress to bear the brunt of the discovery. She twitched off her novel headgear, and opened the door with a ready excuse on her lips.

"My cousin just stepped in, you see, 'm. It was rather dismal being here alone, everything considered."

"How is my sister?" Mrs. Chaunter said shortly, "I am the sister of the lady who lives here."

"You mean Mrs. Erle, mum? She has been laid to the wall these—well, let me see—two and a-half days," the girl said, considering.

Dora was not familiar with the quaint phrase by which the poorer classes of X—— indicate death, but she understood enough to feel sick with horror.

"Not too late! oh, don't say I'm too late!" she cried; then sank down, pale and trembling, on a seat.

"Wouldn't you like to go up and see her, 'm," the girl suggested. "I really think 'twould do you good; she looks so happy now she's still."

"I daren't," the sister moaned to herself. "I daren't, because I'm too late—too late!"

When Mr. Chaunter returned to the house, he found his wife weeping and wringing her hands by the side of the most peaceful occupant of the house.

"Oh to have her back just for half an hour, that she might know she is forgiven!"

"Our forgiveness is as nothing," the priest said gently. Perhaps, had he been aware that the sweet smile which Nella now wore was the first her face had known since she had erred, he would have judged it possible that she had received that forgiveness which is "for ever."

"You must understand that it must be for the last time," Derrick Erle wrote in answer to the summons which had been sent to him at the same time as Dora's. "I thank you for your kindly intentions, and no one can regret her illness more than I do; but I am a married man now, and may one day be a father. I dare not risk my wife's health

and happiness for the sake of a dead past ; besides, my presence on the last occasion was merely a source of pain to us both."

"I hope you did not think I expressed myself unkindly. I did not mean to be brutal," Derrick said apologetically, to Dr. —, when they met.

"Oh, no!" the other answered drily ; "you only expressed yourself as a husband and a father should. Such ties enforce a high code of morality. I can fancy Æneas sending just such a letter to Tyre. But I am sorry to have summoned you, sir. I shall not need to repeat the offence, for the woman is dead. You can go back at once," the old man added more gently. "You can do no good by seeing her."

\* \* \* \* \*

For a long while Derrick sat motionless in the inn chamber repeating to himself the unlikely tale that Nella was dead. How could it be ? Yonder was her cottage, white in sunshine ; the bees were mumbling in the mignonette, the swallows were loud about the roof. He could see the people were moving, that doors opened and shut. He could hear the dogs bark, and the fowls shrieking over their eggs. Could all the machinery of that little world thus go on if a dead lull had fallen on its dominant soul ? He stared at the room which probably contained it until he felt irresistibly inclined to go and see what greeting it had for him. He dared not return home without paying dead Nella so much courtesy ; but it was late in the day ere he faced the love of his youth.

The servant-girl, scared by his white, nervous face, said mechanically—

"Not at home, sir. I mean——"

"You mean that Mrs. Erle is dead. But I must see her all the same ; and you must manage that I see no one else."

He slipped a convincing fee into her hand, and went upstairs. There was no one to dispute his right of entrance into the silent chamber. We tear our hearts out over our dead, we kiss the heavy lids and chafe the hands, crying, "Be of us and amongst us once more, and we will watch the wish of your dear eyes, will hang on your faintest word



for all life's years to come." We are answered by silence—a dead wall against which we hurl ourselves in vain. We weary of our agony, and turn away, since the eyes cannot summon nor voice recall. It is all in vain; so we close the door, and obey the dinner-bell. Derrick's hand shook as it turned the door-handle. He was obliged to lean an instant against the portal. At one time he had loved her well enough to tremble as he approached her. How often he had asked himself in the pause on her threshold, "How will it be with her to-day—grave or gay? And will she be glad as I am? Will her breath draw quick and her mouth tighten when she hears me?"

For a few brief seconds memory transfigured *now* to *then*. They were young and loving again, and he waited for her greeting. In whatsoever mood she might be, he knew that her touch would still the fever of his pulses, her voice calm his agony of pleasure. It is agony sometimes, is it not, to be within a few inches of clasping all your life's happiness to your breast? That she was dead—would have no word for him—did not at the moment strike him. She was there—his love. He was close to her, and presently would be at her feet, as in the old, swift, glorious hours of their past interviews.

"Nella!" he muttered. "Nella!" If his tone was low, had not excess of pleasure oftentimes suffocated his words of feeling? "Nella, is that *you*?"

He went to the bed, and dropped on his knees by her side. "Oh," he groaned, "I know the difference now! If she would only seem to look at me! If she wouldn't look so far away!" He touched the pale cheek with his hand. "That was rosy and warm," he muttered, as he gently put his lips near to her still mouth. "No word, love, no word of forgiveness? If you are Nella, answer my kiss. Is your smile meant for me, or for some one in your new world? They couldn't grudge me one touch, one glimpse of the past, if they've got all your future!" He caught up a tress and curled it round his finger. "That's the only thing like you," he thought. "There is sunlight on its gold as it uncoils. This is the same dear hair I have caught up in both hands—one hand wasn't  
gh to love it in."

The window was open, and let in the sunshine. A velvet butterfly fluttered on the inside pane, trying to get at a rose outside. Its brief hour, made up of sun and sweet, was ebbing, and there was an icy veil twixt it and enjoyment. Derrick went to its assistance, and poised it gently on the coveted flower without. "Am I kinder than heaven?" he asked bitterly, as he looked back to the "silence" on the bed. "Look how that fly settles down to its sweetness. Nella, wouldn't my arms be about you in an instant if some power would but 'remove the veil, remove the veil?'" A child laughed in the garden below, and he cursed it. A bird flew past, its song thrilling its track, and he stared after it with moody eyes. "Why are they not all dead?" he thought.

He looked at her long and wistfully. This was the creature he had once fondled and went mad on! Then he had thought his whisper would have drawn her to him through all worlds. Now she was imperturbably reserved. How she had used to move about his dreams!—ever moving, never still, like *that*. Then he had seemed to be half-dead away from her. Numb to joy or pain—with her, how his soul's fancies sparkled and played! He had winced at her sharp word, had shook with happiness at the touch of her finger-tip; he had been greedy of her smallest gesture, her commonest word. At one time he had been starved of her; never could greet her without hearing "good-bye" sighed between their kiss; and the long-waiting, bloodless days, what joy to blot out their weary agony by saying "we meet to-morrow!" He had left this grand love to perish; he had flung away as a dead weed the heart rich with self-immolation. What had he gained? Shreds of interest, given sparsely by an unloving wife, barren glittering days, and an unloved future. Looking at dead Nella, and thus remembering, he knew that she was avenged; but she, not knowing, held her sweet, imperturbable smile.

"Wife—true wife! Forgive, forgive!" he sobbed, and knelt again by her side. He knew too late that the woman whose effigy was there had been his real mate. He cursed his follies, and called them by their right name—"sins." "Did you know I should call you and look at you when

you would be bound by God's spell, and could not say 'be comforted, Derrick?' If so, you were sorry, for your heart was great. How can I learn death's lesson, and mould my lips to 'this was Nella?' Which is real, life or death? Is life a vision, in which men play at having souls, and wake to find themselves *thus*?"

A light step came down the passage, a small voice piped, "Be quiet, Bruno! Come away, good dog! Come away, sir!" Derrick lifted his head, and moved a little away from the bed. His place was not by the side of dead Nella, but by Rose, Mrs. Erle. The pattering steps drew nearer, and the clank of a chain was heard, mingled with the child's voice in expostulation. Presently appeared in the doorway a huge retriever dog. He was all curl, from his throat to his waving tail, with ardent brown eyes, and lolling tongue. He was dragging after him a little girl, who had vainly stiffened her legs and arms in the effort to hold him back. Her bright rosy face was troubled, but not scared; she was too young to feel awe. The haggard man by the bed was probably considered by her to be one of the many strangers who had been about the house of late.

"I want to take him out for a walk," she panted, "but he will come up after Auntie Nella."

The dog's eagerness overmastered her; with a bound he was free of her grasp, and stood whining by the bed, the tongue in search for his mistress's hand, his eyes querying hers. No pat, no voice! He was evidently dissatisfied, and looked at Derrick with a slight wag of his tail, as though to say, "Make her notice me."

The child followed him to the bedside, and looked softly at the fair stiff face.

"Poor Bruno don't know you're dead, Aunt Nella. I will play with him in the sun every day, and tell you all about it when I see you again."

"If she's dead, how can you see her again?" cried, in a hoarse harsh voice, the man by her side. "To what do you think this will change?"

It was strange how this storm-tossed soul leaned on her answer. All was wreck and darkness unfathomable; yet if her babe's lips could speak him one grain of comfort, he thought it might nourish him.

"I shall see her again," the child iterated.

"How do you know?"

"God says so."

"Ay."

"She will be much more beautiful there," she persisted.

"She is pretty now, don't you think?"

He shook his head.

"She looks kind."

And the little living face, with a tender quiver upon it, bent over the flameless mask. She took a bunch of roses, bruised and sweet, from her belt, and put them in the dead's hand.

"Good-bye," she whispered, and made for the door, urging the dog to follow her. He looked at her for a second, then re-riveted his eyes on the coming caress from his mistress—to his mind it was only momentarily delayed.

The child paused at the door, the sun glorifying her sunny head, her face fresh and rose-like against the grey dawning; the summer wind smote her, stirring her hair, and blowing bright coloured ribbons about its gold. She was full of gracious vitality. She nodded to Derrick.

"If you see her again before I do, tell her I was kind to Bruno."

"You cling to that notion—that of seeing her again?"

"I have learnt the words," the child said triumphantly, "'For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible.'"

She was gone, but neither coaxing nor command could persuade Bruno to follow her. He lingered there with a sigh of discontent and impatience, gathered his limbs under him, and sunk his head on his paws, still with an eye furtively watching the bed.

The day aged. The sunlight on the dead face changed from gold to flane. In the west, a thin spire peered above tawny wood-belts and dim farm-houses sunk deep in saffron stacks. A knell was clanging, and the wind swayed the deep sound of death hither and thither.

The child in the garden checked her play for an instant "That's for Aunt Nella," she said, then trundled her hoop again.

Derrick had kissed his old sweetheart for the last time, had taken that final look, which is sometimes a terrible summary of past memories and future remorse, and had gone on his way, unnoticed, excepting by the servant who had admitted him, and the dog. The latter, half meditating a gambol outside, turned the section of a white gleaming eye towards him as he left the room. He looked entreatingly at the bed, but she would not come, so he decided to wait for her still, and when night came, and the household slept, Bruno still held watch in the silent room, with ear and eye alert, whining occasionally, which was his way of asking, "What and where is she?"





## CHAPTER L.

### TIME'S REVENGE.

"Perhaps it may turn out a song,  
Perhaps it may turn out a sermon."

**F**OUR years afterwards a party of ladies and gentlemen came to Woldshire, house-hunting. They had been attracted by the advertisement that a furnished cottage was to be let in the neighbourhood of X—. The rental was small, and providing that Lady Erle could obtain for £60 a house worth £150 per annum, she was quite prepared to take the said house, in the interest of an old friend and governess, for whom she was acting.

"We will all go," Lady Erle said on the morning when the advertisement attracted her attention.

It was autumn, Oakfield was filled with guests, who had been there long enough to tire of Oakfield and of themselves. They hailed with applause a scheme which might aid them to get hungry by dinner-time; some agreed to ride, others to go by rail, and walk part of the distance.

"I shall drive all the way. I like long drives in the country," Lady Erle said. "Ted, you will drive me, won't you? And what will you do, Derrick? Will you take little Derrick with you in the barouche?"

"I shall not go at all," Sir Derrick said shortly. "I must be in town to-day on business."

"Then Derry can't go."

Derry, a sturdy boy, aged three, partially understood that he was being cheated of some possible pleasure, and began to weep.

"Why can't he go with you?" Derrick asked of his wife.

"My dear, how can I be expected to burthen myself with that great child, putting his feet through my skirts, and feeling heavier and heavier every moment of the way? Besides, Ted's bays are so hot. Supposing there was an accident? I could take care of myself, but I couldn't possibly save the child."

Derrick looked irresolute. The boy settled the question. "Papa, take dear little Derry, on his own knee, and with his own gee-gees."

"I need not enter the house," Derrick thought, "and who there will recognise me? Still it is awkward. I don't like to tell Rose the reason of my aversion to the place. She has such a talent for 'establishing a raw.'"

He acquiesced of course, and with Derrick on his knee, and a cigar in his mouth, sat on the box of the family carriage and tried to look oblivious of the bays, when they dashed past him, with his wife and his wife's cousin for freight. Two guests of the Erles, riding behind, discussed their hosts with the amiability peculiar to friendship.

"Handsome fellow, Ted Grahame!"

"Pretty woman, Lady Erle!"

"Good-natured fellow, Erle!" and so on. Verily Job's friends were not so unkind after all; they spared the afflicted Uzzite the damnation of their praise.

"A walnut tree, a froggy pond, moss paths, fence broken, very badly kept up," Lady Erle said, as she surveyed the exterior of the cottage. "It will not suit unless it is more cheery inside."

"It looks like a place to repent a sin in," one of her companions suggested.

"That depends on one's notion as to how the process should be carried out, Lady Erle said lightly. "The wily pilgrims boiled the peas they were ordered to wear in their shoes; if I ever repented, I should do so with all the luxuries of the season. But there is an infallible recipe against repentance," she added in a low tone.

"What is it?" Mr. Grahame asked in her ear. He liked Rose well enough to care to know her half-fledged thoughts.

"Never being found out," she whispered back. "Now we will go through the rooms." The house had the blight

of desertion on it. Shrivelled flies swung in the webbed crevices of the window-sills. One or two skeletons of geraniums showed stark and yellow in the flower-stand; the curtains were stiff; the piano was out of tune.

"It is a place to stagnate in," Lady Erle said, as she sat down and rattled a galop on the rebellious keys. "I shall remember it in my dreams."

The laughter and the chatter, the gay dresses moving about through the dingy shadows, the frivolous comments on the scene, seemed as incongruous to Derrick as a picnic held in a churchyard. The air of the place to him was one deep sigh. He drifted out of the room while his wife was recalling reminiscences of Coote and Tinney, and favourite partners, and drew near to the awed servant-girl, who was in the passage, watching the company at a respectful distance, much as a brown sparrow might incline a surprised eye towards an unusual descent of rare-plumaged foreign birds on its soil.

Derrick hesitated. He was not glib of speech, and the girl was taciturn. He gave her money, his code being that all women are born with a natural inclination of hand to pocket; and that Eve assumed an artificial garb chiefly for the purpose of storing her stolen goods.

The girl brightened into an expression of loquacity as she awaited his question.

"Did you attend the lady who died here some years since?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was typhus, was it not?"

"Some such thing, but the doctor could tell you right. The complaint was bad in the village at the time. Many people died, chiefly children. Now I thought my mistress couldn't abide children. She would walk out of the road if ever she saw one coming; and the sound of the little lads cheering, when they ran home from school, seemed to make her quite restless. But when little Willie Pearson sickened of it, and his old grandmother went silly over the trouble of him, he being an orphan and having only her to look to, my mistress went and nursed him. Maybe she took it so, maybe 'twas in the air, and she would have had it anyhow. She took it badly."



"Did the doctor attend her?"

"Not till the last. She wouldn't have him sent for. She used to lay for hours alone in the dusk, while she was sickening, and wouldn't let me come, unless she rang for me, which wasn't often."

"Did she ask for—for any one?"

"Never."

"Did she not wish to have her friends written to?"

"When she was off her head, she used to call to me to bring her little Derrick, or some such name. She wanted to put him to sleep. I always said, 'Presently, dear; he'll be with you presently;' and then she'd get quiet, hugging up the pillow tight."

"Were you with her when she died?"

The girl looked ashamed.

"I can't say I was, sir. It was a lovely evening, you see, and I had no thought of her passing away; and when a friend—the young man I walk with—whistled over the hedge, I just went out to have a breath of the hayfields. I went up to see the lady first. She was in her senses, and said she didn't want anything. I asked her if she wouldn't see the clergyman. She said, 'No, for he is a shadow—you are all shadows, Mary.' She bade me good night. So I didn't come in till early next morning, just when the birds were getting noisy. All the same as usual,—the window open, the clock going, the robin she used to feed on the window had got quite bold, and was perched on the bed-head, waiting for his crumbs."

"And your mistress?"

"She was quite quiet, sir."

There was a pause. The girl was weeping a little, not so much from grief as from sympathy with the pathos of her own voice. Derrick was silent, and silence in some cases is a man's eloquence. A sound of jumping feet, and gleeful chatter, made them look up towards the stairs.

Little Derrick was there, with his slave, by courtesy styled nursemaid; he was shouting for papa to come directly. He had something to show papa. Rebellion to Derrick would have occasioned more clamour, and attracted the attention of the party in the sitting-room. So

his father obeyed quickly, saying, "Hush, Derry, you musn't make such a row!"

"Why not?" the child asked; "any one sick?"

"Yes," Derrick cried passionately; "papa is sick, sick with memory. Come downstairs, Derrick."

But the child pulled him resolutely forward. He had made a great discovery, and the joy of finding a new world is to tell the peoples of the old worlds of it. Small interest a new continent would have for the last man. The child led his father to the bedroom with which Derrick was already familiar. This apartment was even more neglected than those below, probably the awe of the death-change still kept it inviolate from intrusion. One window had been open long enough to allow a Virginian creeper to thrust its trail of fire athwart the grey shutter-sides, and up by the rim of the curtain, which had not been drawn since there had been no occupant of the sick-bed, whom the sun might blind or delight.

Derrick scarcely dared look round. The place was thick with arrows for him. He called "Derrick!" The touch of the boy's hand would have been a comfort to him.

"Look, papa," the child cried, all excitement, "there's little boys here as well as me! There's a horse—but his leg is broken; and a lamb—with bits of its wool pulled out; and here's a box of soldiers—I never had these—they stand on their heads, all by themselves!"

His delight was great at the gymnastic feats of the grenadiers; he toddled with them to a sunny spot near the window, and began to test their abilities by every preventive invention in his power.

"Get him away," Derrick cried to the servant outside. "It is very damp and unhealthy here. Promise him anything you like; only get him away."

The boy was too astute to be beguiled by promises. "I've got him!" he cried, hugging up one rather bigger in hue and more ferocious in busbie than the rest. "I've got the captain, and I shan't part with him!" Then he whispered to his father—"Give the other little boy a new one;" and with that concession to conscience trotted off, beautiful and uproarious.

As the child and his attendant departed, Nella's servant approached Derrick.

"Would you like to have this, sir?" she said. "It fell out of *her* hands when they were clasped on her breast."

It was a curl—bright as yellow floss, and as soft.

Derrick touched it reverently.

"Maybe, it's an angel's curl I'm touching," he thought. "The child at least was sinless!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"No, Ted, it can never be!" Lady Erle was speaking words of reprobation where they should never have been needed. The two were driving fast, beneath the light of the red harvest-moon, and tasting breaths of sweet night-air crossed here and there by fumes of peat smoke.

"Folly sometimes is a greater sin than sin itself. I was married too early, and from insincere motives. I like you too well, as you know, or you wouldn't have dared to talk to me as you have done. But here it must end. Derrick isn't a bad fellow; but if he were, I should never leave him."

"You have made a fool of me," the young man began, savagely using his whip on his team.

"That was not my intention; but even so, it is better than making fools of three people. A woman in a false position is a dissonance to herself and to all connected with her; and you, who love me so well now—now, while no inconvenience has attached to my position—how would you feel, when my arms round your neck turned by the legerdemain of Time into a log for your feet? I have mixed in the world a little. I have seen the two faces a man turns at different periods to the woman he worships—to the same woman when she worships him back, even to boredom. There is no persistent devotion without law, no enduring tie unless it be knotted by necessity. Now, don't look black, and pull your moustache. After all, supposing we had had our dream out, and eloped—shouldn't we be ready to hang ourselves this day year?"

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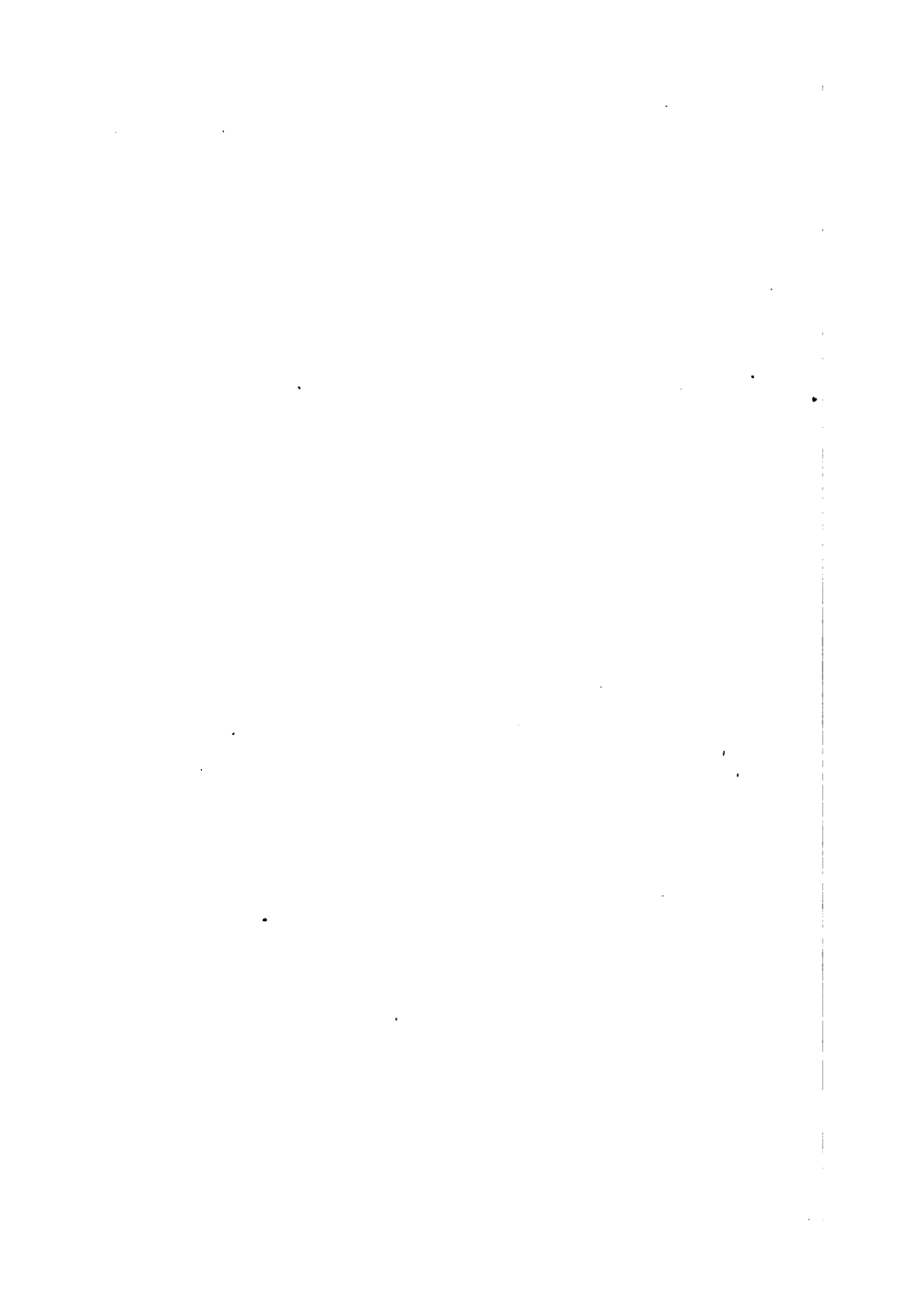
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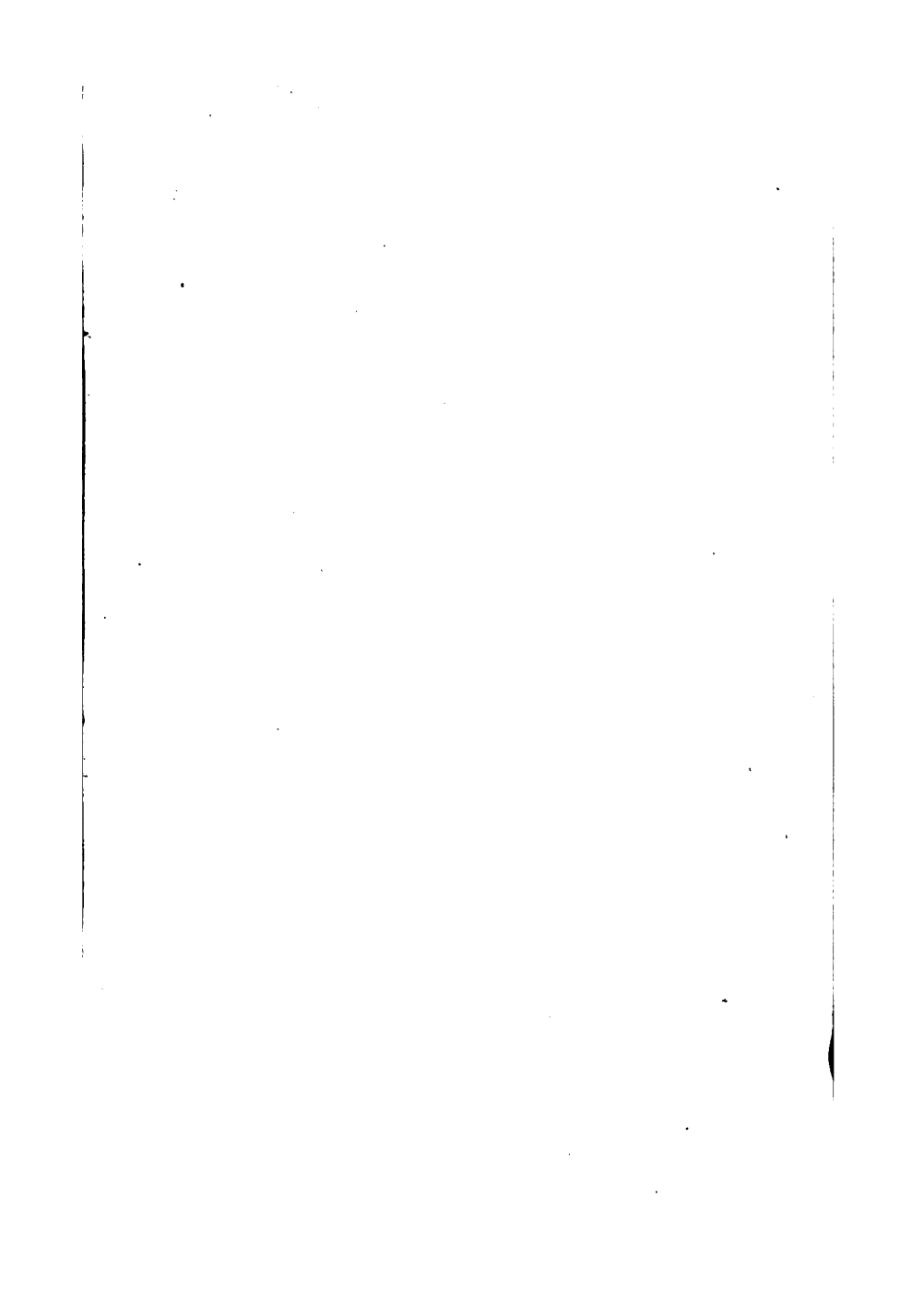
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